

NEW

VOLUME 6

Psychology Now

TAKE CONTROL OF YOUR MIND
FOR A HAPPIER, HEALTHIER LIFE



"LOOK AT HOW YOUR LIVING
SPACE IS AFFECTING YOUR
RELATIONSHIPS"

Exclusive

**DILLY
CARTER**

ON WHY WE
NEED TO
DECLUTTER
TO IMPROVE OUR
WELLBEING



**116
pages**
OF EXPERT
ADVICE

CAN DESIRE,
PASSION, SEX
& LOVE EXIST
IN HARMONY?

HOW TO UNLOCK *Your Emotions*

+
HANDLE CONFLICT BETTER
STOP COMPARING YOURSELF
BE KIND TO YOUR INNER CHILD

UNDERSTAND WHEN
it's good
TO GOSSIP



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Welcome to

Psychology
Now

VOLUME 6

TAKE CONTROL OF YOUR MIND
FOR A HAPPIER, HEALTHIER LIFE

Understanding human behaviour and mental processes, whether our own or those belonging to others, is essential if we want to make better decisions and lead happier lives. Why do we feel certain emotions in specific situations? Why do we behave in particular ways? And what can we do to overcome the things that hold us back? Delve into the world of psychology and build a better relationship with your mind. Learn how to be kind to it, unlock its full potential and use it to your advantage.

In the pages that follow, we explore what it means to be emotionally intelligent, how to heal our inner child wounds, the challenges of midlife, and why separateness is essential for connection. We also look into the power of persuasion, the healthcare gender bias, living in the shadows of someone, how to stress better, and why conflict can be good.

Packed full of expert guidance from psychologists, counsellors and other professionals, we also speak exclusively to Dilly Carter about the impact our physical environment can have on our mental health.

The mind is a powerful tool. Learn how to take control of your own mind today for a happier, healthier tomorrow.



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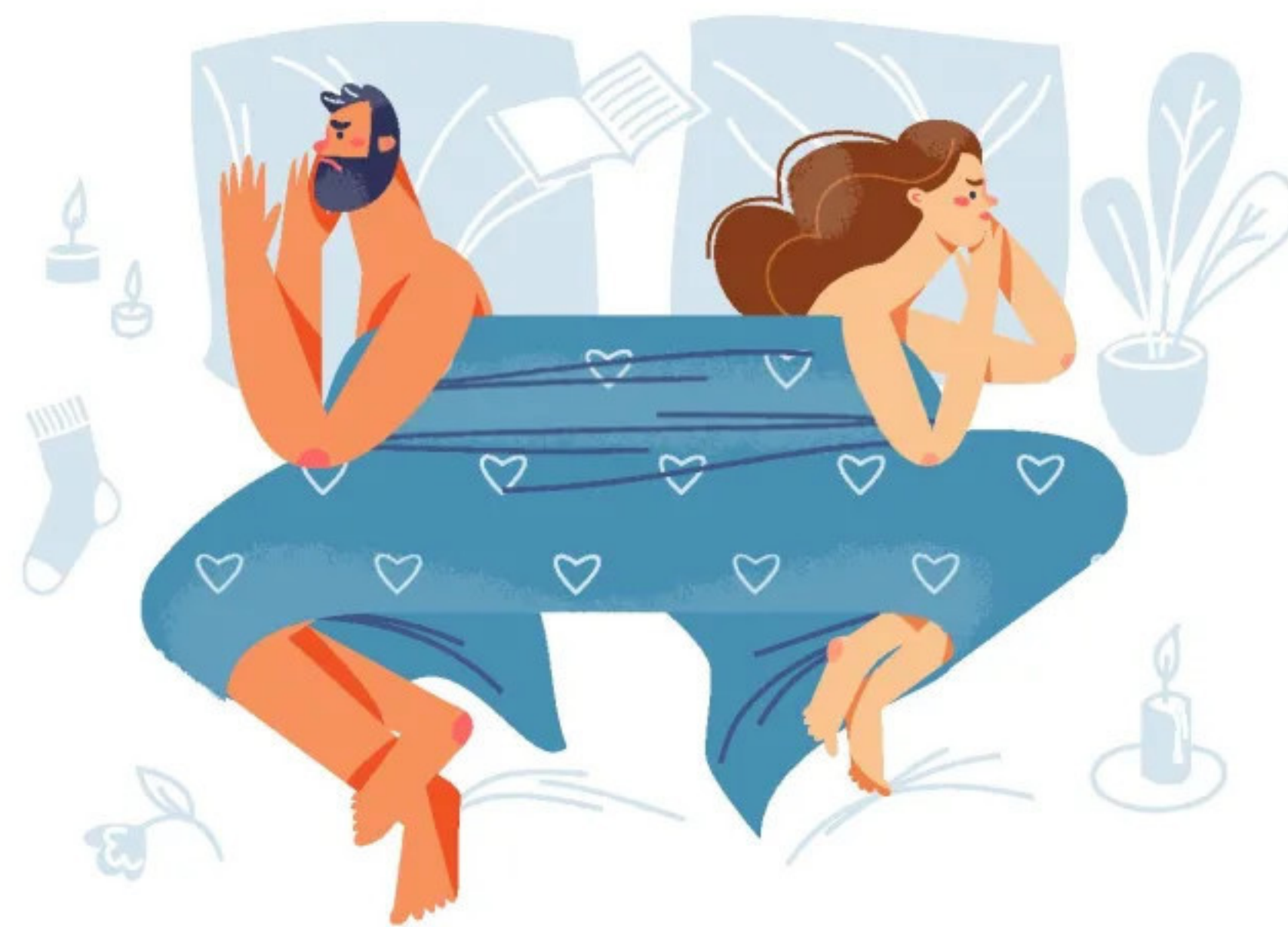


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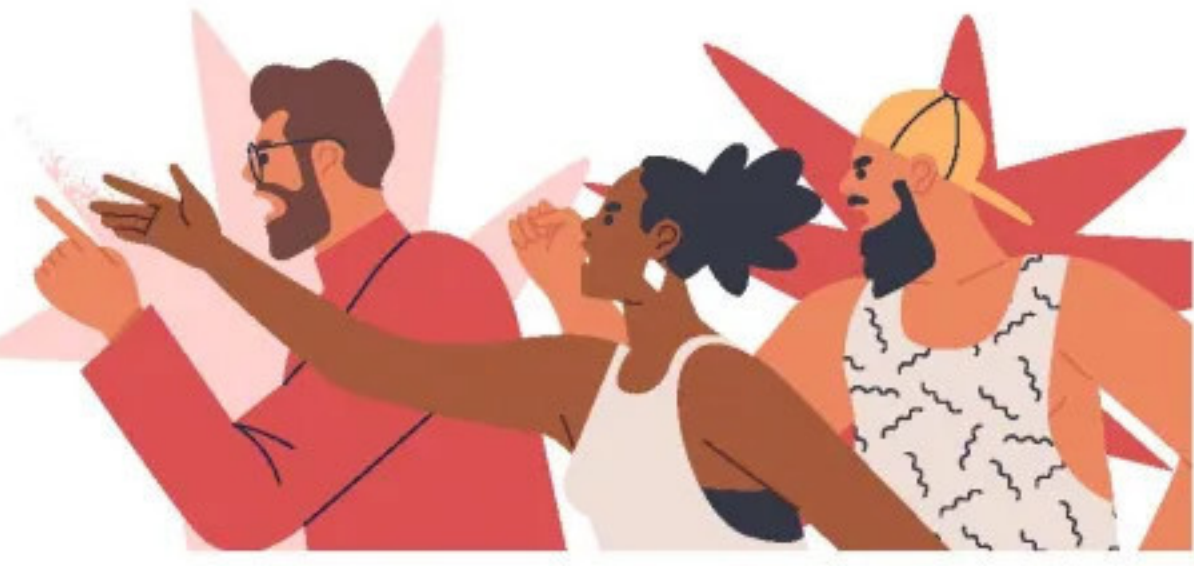
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GIVE YOUR
BRAIN A MICROBREAK

THE POWER *OF* *Persuasion*

*Understand the art of
influencing with these ten
psychology facts*



WORDS AILSA HARVEY

How easily can you be persuaded? And how strong are your persuasive powers? Perhaps you have mastered some psychological techniques to convince others of which ideas you think are best. In reality, there are many factors that impact how quickly, easily and permanently an individual makes a personal decision. And a technique that helps one person decide to act, could make another person react opposingly. Let's take a look at what persuasion actually involves and how the brain makes choices.

Persuasion is defined as any method of communication that is made with the intent to shape or change the actions of others. Whether politicians sway your mind on who to vote for with a repetitive

statement, advertisement makers tug on your emotions, or the influence of your peers reduces your ability to form completely individual views, here are ten facts to help you better understand the dark art of persuasive powers.

1 ENCOURAGE A COMMITMENT

When someone is persuaded, they are fully committed. But, it can take some time for an individual to consider two options before settling on a final decision. For example, if you are trying to persuade a friend to do something you believe is in their best interest, the first step is to get them to say the simple word, 'yes'. By getting a definitive answer, even

if that person might change their mind at a later time, the chances of them performing the act are much greater. Many people value how their character is perceived by others. And, after saying 'yes' to a request, sticking to your word makes you appear to be more honest and trustworthy. For this reason, once someone has initially indicated that they will do something, they become much more likely to do so. »

HOW CAN EMOTIONS IMPACT OUR DECISIONS?

If you are scared of something, you might be quick to say no, while if you get angry you are more easily convinced to perform a hurtful action. The part of your body responsible for making these quick, emotion-fuelled decisions is an area deep within the brain, called the limbic system. Most of your decisions are influenced by emotion to some level, but when emotions are high, what we can be persuaded to do and not do can vary from our usual choices. When feeling sad, you could be easily persuaded against something that may benefit you. This is due to negative emotions exaggerating your misfortune. This could include remaining in an unhappy relationship or not accepting a new job opportunity. Some of the heightened emotions that finalise decision-making much quicker are anger, fear and excitement. This is caused by the adrenaline that is released in the body through joy or during the fight-or-flight reaction.

“ PERSUASION IS COMMUNICATION MADE WITH THE INTENT TO SHAPE THE ACTIONS OF OTHERS ”

2 SOCIAL PROOF

Have you ever burst out into laughter because your friend has fallen into a fit of giggles? Or got into trouble for something that you only did because those around you were doing it? Psychologists have learned that the behaviour of other people greatly impacts how likely we are to do something. This is where the term 'socially acceptable' comes from. The more people there are who act one way in a specific situation, the more it becomes cemented as the correct way to act in our brains. Salespeople might persuade you to buy something by informing you of how popular a product is. This is a way of persuading you to follow the crowd. The technique works because most people want to fit in, or have the mentality that if everyone has chosen to do something, there must be benefits to doing so.

3 THE LAW OF RECIPROCATION

Generally speaking, people have a psychological need to be even with everyone they interact with. This means that if someone provides a favour to you, you will want to reciprocate it in some way. Therefore, you can subtly persuade someone to offer their generosity by doing something for them first. One example of this is paying the bill at the end of a meal. If one member of a party insists on paying for everyone, the next time that the same group is in the same situation, everyone else will feel as though they want to pay. However, the same is true when the acts are harmful to an individual. If you offend or hurt someone, they are likely to feel like doing the same to you.

4 LISTENING TO AUTHORITY

Everyone is entitled to provide you with advice on any subject, but who is more likely to influence you? Are you more likely to accept medical advice from a friend or a doctor? The answer is that even though you know your friend better, an expert in your issue has more authority and power of persuasion in this instance. Trusting a professional with your personal choices takes away the repercussions of your actions. You trust that the most knowledgeable person holds the right answer and if they are wrong, there is someone to blame other than yourself. Think of it as a free pass of responsibility.

5 FEELING CONNECTED

Whether it be your close friends, romantic partner or relatives, there are certain people with whom you will naturally feel a closer bond. You might have known them for a long time, and feel like they understand you well. When someone causes you to feel the emotions of attraction and trust, you are more likely to listen to their

advice and they can easily persuade you. This is known as the 'halo effect', and works when someone is viewed in a more positive light. In fact, you don't even have to know the person for the halo effect to work. Studies show that those who you perceive to be more physically attractive have a higher power of persuasion over you than others. The positive impression that is initially made helps your mind to perceive them as a good person.

6 THE FEAR OF LOSS

Even if two items are of the same value, people generally become more passionate about not losing something than about gaining something. This is a factor that many salespeople take into consideration when persuading consumers to buy a product. Although they are required to also explain the benefit of possessing the item they are selling, many focus on the scarcity of the items, to make customers feel lucky to own it. If something is supposedly 'selling out fast', you might feel more urged to make an unnecessary purchase and achieve the satisfaction of being one of the few to own the popular item. To reduce the chances of your rational decisions being overtaken by this power of persuasion, you should take a moment to consider the item and whether it suits your needs.

7 THE POWER OF COMPLIMENTS

Humans have a need to be accepted and liked. When this is in the form of a received compliment, a person's self-esteem is significantly boosted, but so is their ability to be manipulated. This is largely due to the fact that we love to be liked and respected. When this happens, a complimented person is more likely to want to please the complimenter in return. This is why, when being approached by a salesperson, they may be overly friendly

“THE MORE PEOPLE THERE ARE WHO ACT ONE WAY IN A SITUATION, THE MORE IT BECOMES CEMENTED AS THE CORRECT WAY TO ACT IN OUR BRAINS”

before engaging in conversation about a sale. To successfully persuade someone through using this method, the compliments need to come across as sincere as possible.

8 REPEATED POINTS

If you hear something enough times, your brain will classify it as the truth, even if it isn't. That's because your thoughts are constantly being influenced by your external environment. In the brain, repetition helps to build long-term memory by strengthening chemical pathways between brain cells. When the statement being repeated is a persuasive argument, this can become ingrained in a person's mind, and may influence the choices they make. Studies show when a persuasive argument is repeated at a moderate level, a listener is more likely to agree with the statement. So, next time you listen to the speech of a politician, pay attention to which of their arguments seem to be stuck on repeat.

9 ACKNOWLEDGING THE BALANCE

If you are desperately trying to convince someone to do something, you may be tempted to bombard them with all the positive points that come with your argument. But, for most people, knowing the cons of choosing an action will help them to make that leap. This works by building trust. Most choices come with positive and negative elements, and by acknowledging this, the person who is making the decision will feel fully informed. Humans have learned to hold some scepticism when retaining news, as this is what keeps us safe. As long as the positives outweigh the negatives, a person is more likely to be persuaded by a balanced argument.

10 LITTLE BY LITTLE

Depending on the scale of a decision, most people require time to think over their choice. If you are persuading someone to make a big change, the chances of success are less likely over a short timeframe. Instead, there are usually small adjustments a person can make on the route to achieving a greater change. Every time you successfully persuade a person, the higher the chances are of them being persuaded by you the next time. This is a method many salespeople use, called the 'foot-in-door' technique. One example is the escalation

from free samples. Once a person is persuaded to take a free sample, the interest is sparked. Then, they could be convinced into making a small purchase, before a later proposal to pay for a subscription is introduced. If the salesperson began by asking the individual to start a subscription outright, the purchase would be less likely to go ahead. By increasing the commitment little by little, the customer has built a trusting relationship and familiarity with the product, resulting in successful persuasion. ■

CAUGHT BETWEEN VALUES

We choose which lifestyles to follow or which action to take based on the facts we know to be true and the opinions we hold. But, what happens when we have two ideas that don't align? An example of this is when you really want to start a task with an imminent deadline, but there is an event that you would love to attend that would prevent you from completing it. In this scenario, your brain thinks that both choices are good for you to some extent, but they conflict. Another example arises in smokers who enjoy smoking but know that they should quit.

When we hold these inconsistent thoughts, studies show that our bodies can suffer from negative physical tension as well as mental stress. One way that we can be persuaded to choose one of the opposing options is to increase the conflict between the two ideas by adding more weight to one. This is called the theory of cognitive dissonance. As humans, we are constantly trying to resolve this internal conflict and live in line with our values. If a friend lists more activities that you would miss out on at the event, your mind is persuaded more towards abandoning your deadline.

Meanwhile, anti-smoking campaigns will use vivid imagery of body deterioration to further cement the facts that smokers may already know, further persuading them to choose their health.

WHEN GRUMPY IS GOOD!

*Feeling gloomy? Not looking
on the bright side of life can
actually have its benefits*

WORDS LOUISE PYNE

We've all had a lot to deal with over the last few years - and for many, life may still be an uphill struggle. You might find yourself feeling fine one minute, only to be riddled with anxiety the next. This is all pretty normal, but it can be debilitating, so it's important to recognise and accept your thoughts and feelings - even the worst ones, says clinical therapist Kate Morris-Bates, founder of InsideOut Wellness.

We'd all love to be cheerful 100% of the time, but that's not realistic. What is possible, however, is reframing negative emotions. Let's not forget that if we didn't experience low times, we'd never fully appreciate the highs.

Sadness boosts memory

A study by the University of California found that on rainy days, people had a much better recollection of details compared to sunny days where their memory was less accurate. "Moods that are associated with negative emotions

“THE TRICK IS TO UNDERSTAND THE RESPONSE AND THE REASON BEHIND THE EMOTION”

WAYS TO OWN YOUR FEELINGS

Kate shares her top tips for handling those difficult emotions

APPRECIATE THE GOOD TIMES

Try to be more flexible in your approach to your feelings. Allow yourself to savour positive emotions that arise – and equally consider any negative feelings you may have, to bring yourself an awareness of them.

ACCEPT YOURSELF

Validation is an effective way of communicating that you have accepted someone's emotional experience, whether or not you agree with it. If validation is not received, it can lead to feelings of isolation, rejection and shame. Rather than seeking validation from others, seek it from yourself.

PRIORITISE YOUR MENTAL HEALTH

People often share how they're improving their physical wellbeing, but we rarely see what others do to boost their mental health when feeling exhausted, sad or anxious. Mental health is as important as physical health, so treat yours with the same respect.

tend to be more attentive, thoughtful and analytical than their positive counterparts,” explains Kate. “Research has shown that we are less likely to ‘corrupt our memories with misleading information’ when we are in a less than good mood.”

Stress spurs you on

“Cortisol is the hormone commonly used to measure stress. Typically, raised cortisol, or the symptoms of it, serve as a wake-up call for individuals to change habits that are not serving them and find ways of reducing their stress levels,” explains Kate. “The key is to harness cortisol-driven stress and anxiety and use it to your advantage.”

Practising meditation and mindfulness is one way to do this, as it helps to induce a heightened state of awareness. “Think of it as a form of personal mental hygiene. It's a learned skill that must be practised regularly to exert effect,” says Kate. Search YouTube for free, guided meditations.

Negativity brings focus

If we're too optimistic there's a chance we can leave ourselves open to danger. “If a situation presents significant risk, then a pessimist is far more likely to look for the worst that can happen,” says Kate. Always check in with your responses to a situation, she suggests. “Then assess whether you are using your optimism or pessimism to best effect.”

Anger leads to action

A certain amount of fury is part of our ‘fight or flight’ survival response and, when channelled correctly, can be a force for positive change. “Feelings are not problems; they are normal responses to situations. The trick is to understand the response and the reason behind the emotion,” says Kate.

How to handle your anger

Rather than resisting it, be open to the emotion, using it for insights into the triggers that are making you angry. You can then work to improve your response, making sure it's not simply hot-headed or irrational. One way of doing this is to keep a journal. Every time you feel a burst of rage bubbling, write down your feelings in whatever form comes to you – single words, full sentences, or even simple drawings or doodles. This allows you to be true to your feelings and will help you to understand them better. ■





WHY Decluttering CAN BOOST YOUR WELLBEING

We explore the link between clutter and mental health, and how reordering your environment can help with everything from your stress levels to your relationships

WORDS JULIE BASSETT

Take a minute and look at the space around you right now. How does it make you feel? Is everything neat and ordered? Tidy and organised? Or are there piles of things that need to be put away? Clutter on the table, shelves filled to the brim and out-of-place items? Catch the thoughts and feelings running through your head when you observe your surroundings, whether that's calmness and happiness or an overwhelming feeling of worry and stress.

Our environment can change the way we feel, even if we're not completely aware of it. An untidy desk can make it hard to find the materials you need for the day's work, which can leave you feeling frustrated and unprepared. You might have an outfit planned for a special occasion, but when it comes to the time to wear it, you can't find what you're looking for or it's not clean, which creates panic. Are you always having to find your house keys, the remote control or that book you promised to give to a friend?

Clutter can build up in our lives without us realising it. We make plans for a big spring clean, a wardrobe sort-out or donating old toys, but when life is busy, we just don't find the time. However, living in an

environment that's not ordered in the way that's right for you can have a huge impact on your mental health and wellbeing.

We don't mean creating a show home that dazzles in the art of minimalism and sparkles and shines on every surface. That's great if that's what makes you happy, but it's not for everyone. You want your living space to work in a way that makes your life a little easier and creates a safe space where you feel truly relaxed. To the outside eye, your home might seem tidy enough, but if you're fed up with the clutter and not being able to find what you need when you need it, it might be time for a change.

What is clutter?

What do we mean by 'clutter'? It's a selection of things that are placed in an untidy or disorganised way, things that are out of place or things that don't have a place. It's often those

items that we don't quite know what to do with, stuff we've been given but don't really need, or objects we can't quite seem to get rid of because they might come in handy one day. Sometimes, items have a certain emotional attachment, even if they don't have an immediate purpose in our lives.

It might seem harmless enough to have a little clutter lying around, but if it's starting to take a toll on your mental health, then it needs to be dealt with. Clutter can increase your stress levels by acting as a constant reminder of things you need to sort and do, like a visual to-do list that never gets ticked off. It can also make it harder to focus and concentrate, or relax and unwind. Clutter in a shared home can also cause strain on relationships, particularly if there are arguments about finding things or different expectations of what constitutes clutter. We often judge »

“CLUTTER CAN INCREASE YOUR STRESS LEVELS BY ACTING AS A CONSTANT REMINDER”



HOW TO DECLUTTER SUSTAINABLY

One of the hardest parts of decluttering is figuring out what to do with the things you don't want. Sending lots of things to a landfill isn't environmentally friendly, and putting things in the bin can cause a lot of anxiety and guilt for many of us who are trying to live more sustainably. However, when you choose to declutter responsibly, this can make it a positive experience and boost your mental health. For example, if you have a lot of food that's in date but you'll never use it and it's getting in the way, why not take it to your local food bank? Clothes that are good as new that you won't wear can be sold or donated to a charity shop, helping to keep them out of a landfill and in circulation on the second-hand market. Try to be creative, too – something that doesn't work for you right now could be reused in another way or upcycled – turning something unloved into something loved can give you a real sense of purpose and fulfilment.

ourselves around clutter, too, worrying about the impression our home might give to others, or wondering why we can't get on top of it when it seems like an easy task on paper.

It's not that simple, though. When we're already getting pulled in so many different directions with work, family, exercise, socialising and household tasks, the thought of spending time dealing with clutter can feel draining. And the more it builds up, the more it starts to affect us. If you feel like your home isn't the relaxing space you need it to be, it's time to make a plan to get on top of the clutter bit by bit.

The opposite of clutter is order. It's not necessarily the same as thinking in terms of tidy and untidy, or neat and messy. The point is to find a system of order that works in your life, where you have the things you need, where you need them and when you need them. This can reduce strain, stress and worry, which in turn can improve your mental health.

How clutter can impact mental health

The physical impact of clutter is obvious. You can see the junk drawer starting to overflow, piles of old clothes gathering at the bottom

of the wardrobe, broken toys that need repairing, or a garage packed with things that need clearing out. The mental impact can be less immediately obvious, and not everyone is affected in the same way. We all have a different tolerance for how much clutter we can take. However, there are some signs that clutter is beginning to affect your wellbeing.

Ideally, your home environment should be a place away from the stress of work, somewhere you feel relaxed and calm. This isn't always easy if you share a home with a flatmate, partner or children – more people in a space equals more items to manage. Having high levels of clutter can increase your stress levels; according to some studies, cortisol levels are higher in those who live in a cluttered environment.

Having clutter in your way can also make it harder to focus on tasks. Work duties can be more complex to complete if your desk is piled high with papers and books, and it can be difficult to keep on top of cleaning a space if there is a lot of clutter around. One study* found that 'clutter problems led to a significant decrease in satisfaction with life among older adults', while also looking at the link between procrastination and clutter across different generations. You're more likely to procrastinate on a job you need to do when there is clutter in the way – imagine you need to pay the bill that came through the other day but can't find the details when you need them, so the job gets delayed or forgotten.

If you live with a partner, you may find their clutter particularly hard to deal with, as it could be intruding into your space and make you feel like you have no control over your environment. Many parents also feel this way, as their children require more items that can end up cluttering surfaces over time, as well as toys everywhere. If your home makes you feel uncomfortable, to the point where you don't want to invite people over, this can also impact your friendships and other relationships, as well as increase your sense of judgement and shame.

There have also been links found between clutter and lack of sleep, bad eating habits and lower self-esteem. Clearly, getting a handle on clutter can improve many different areas in your life.

How does clutter build up?

It's easy to pass off clutter as a result of laziness – surely it's not that hard to just put something in its proper place? But this is very rarely the case. Even the most organised and tidy of people can end up with a cluttered environment.

It affects some people more than others, which can depend on our own personality type. For those with more perfectionist tendencies, clutter can feel distressing. There

“WE ALL HAVE A DIFFERENT TOLERANCE FOR HOW MUCH CLUTTER WE CAN TAKE”

are those who find it difficult to sort and order, which makes it hard to get on top of clutter in the first place. For some, it can be impossible to focus on one task at a time, looking at the clutter as a whole and feeling overwhelmed, not knowing where to start.

It can also make a difference as to the kind of environment that you were brought up in. If you grew up in a home that was disordered and cluttered, you might either copy that in your own home in later life or rebel against it and seek strict order. If you try to maintain a neat and uncluttered home at all times, even a small amount of clutter can feel like it's hard to cope with.

Clutter builds up for a lot of different reasons. An overwhelming feeling, as we've mentioned, is often a big factor. It can feel like there's just too much to do – it's not just the act of deciding that something has to go, but it's finding a way of getting rid of it. This is why many of us start the process and sort through the clutter, but then end up with piles of things to sell, repair or donate in another location. The prospect of seeing decluttering through from start to finish can seem very daunting.

Sometimes, we keep things for other reasons. Items might have sentimental value, but no real place to live in our home. These might be things that have been given to us by relatives or handed down through the family. Maybe it's items that belonged to children who have left home, or older relatives who have passed away. This attachment can create conflict – we don't necessarily want or need the item, but we feel obliged to keep it or feel like it's just too hard to give it away.

We all keep things 'just in case' too. Those old clothes that no longer fit, but might one day; all those cables for long-disposed-of tech that may come in handy again; a huge assortment of obscure batteries and bulbs. We

DIGITAL CLUTTER

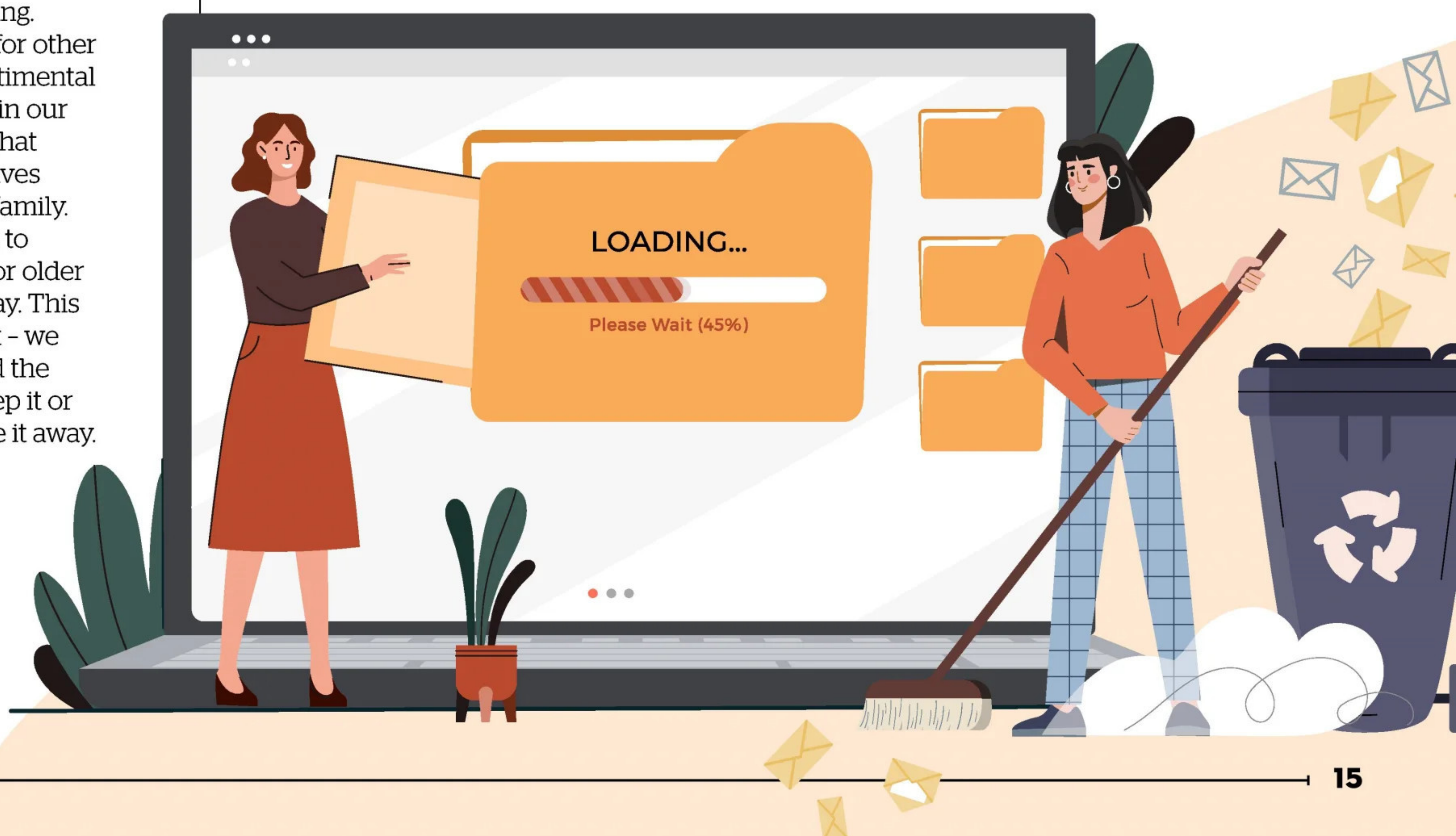
When we think of clutter, we usually think of physical belongings getting in the way. However, in this modern age, we also need to consider our digital clutter. If you have hundreds of unread emails, every text message you've ever sent, 30 versions of the same photo in your camera roll and a computer desktop full of downloaded files and random folders, this can also have an impact on your mental health. It can make it much harder to find things when you need to, which increases stress levels and anxiety. Try to organise emails as they come in – reply straight away, flag up for a future response, store in a labelled folder to refer back to, or delete any that are irrelevant. Archive chat conversations that haven't been active in more than six months, and do a social media audit to remove yourself from groups that you don't engage in. It can be quite a mammoth task at first, but you will find it easier to put systems in place for a fresh start once you've decluttered.

sometimes attach meaning to items too, that may help to define who we want to be and are part of the identity we want to create for ourselves. These could be things that we feel we 'should' have in our home, even if we don't need to, just to convey a certain impression. Or it might be something that we want to be part of our lifestyle, but never find time to engage with – a new hobby that we had an interest in starting, workout equipment that we purchased to get fit at home or the latest kitchen gadget.

The problem is that we live in a throwaway culture – there's always something new to buy that promises to solve an issue or change our lives. So we buy it, full of hope and promise, but it's forgotten about just as

fast as something else comes along. Fast fashion, for example, makes it easy to keep on top of trends, but styles pass and the clothes just sit there, unworn and unloved. Often the quality of these cheaper items is low too, so they're harder to pass on or donate, cluttering up our homes with no real value.

Other items that we hang on to bring us a sense of comfort and joy, and that's a good thing. Decluttering isn't about ruthlessly getting rid of everything we own and living in a stark, possession-free home. It's about learning what we want and love in our homes, and what is causing us extra stress and anxiety. The answer isn't about having no clutter at all; it's about reorganising your items and giving those things you want to keep a »



proper place in your environment, finding that important balance between clutter and comfort. Some people will want to display lots of items that are important to them; others will want a more minimalist finish.

Benefits of decluttering

Deciding that you need to get on top of your clutter is the first step. Acknowledging that something needs to be done and that it's having an impact on your mental health is a powerful motivator in itself. The aim is to create a sense of pride in your home, where everything is where you want it to be, where you feel comfortable and safe, and where you are happy to invite friends or family to share in your environment.

There are many benefits to decluttering your home. The act of sorting, organising and getting rid of items can help you to feel a sense of real achievement and confidence in your ability to create an environment that suits you. As you start to sort out one area, you will feel a boost to help you carry on

to other areas. And in time, you will be less likely to introduce new clutter in the future.

It can also help to reduce your stress levels and anxiety, giving you back a safe and controlled space where you can relax, away from other life stressors. You may also find that you focus better around the home and are able to complete tasks more easily. Cooking, for example, is a lot more enjoyable if you can find all the equipment and ingredients you need with no effort. You may find that you enjoy the process of getting dressed in the morning more with a curated and tidy wardrobe to look through, boosting self-esteem.

Decluttering can also improve your energy levels, removing unnecessary obstacles in your daily life. When you know where things are, you can save time. Plus, you don't have to use your brain power to think and remember how to find something, freeing up some decision-making capacity for other things. It can improve your relationships with the other people in your home, as long as the

decluttering process is worked on together to find a happy balance that suits everyone.

How to remove clutter

Getting started with decluttering can be hard, but there are some things you can do to make it less imposing. It's important to understand that you're not going to be able to do it overnight. It takes time to build up clutter - over many years in most cases - so it's not going to be solved straight away.

Start by thinking about where you need to start. Which area of your home causes you the most conflict? For some people, the entrance to the home sets the scene. If you feel stressed as soon as you walk in the door, maybe your hallway is your starting point. Or if you're struggling to relax and sleep, it could be that decluttering your bedroom and creating a calm environment in there will improve your sleep, restore your energy and give you the motivation to continue decluttering throughout your home. What will have the biggest impact on your mental health right now?

Also, think about your goals - what are you hoping to achieve? Do you want to create a system where everything has its place, to save you time and energy in your daily life? Or do you want to free up some space to open up your home and make it easier to clean and keep tidy? Or maybe you feel that certain items are reminders of a past you're trying to move on from and want a fresh start? Whatever your motivations, it's important to have a clear goal to drive you through the process.

Once you have a starting point and a goal, you can begin decluttering. Set yourself an amount of time - it's easy to get carried away, but you don't want this to take over your life. You might set aside a day at the weekend for bigger tasks, or try a mini 15-minute job every evening. Breaking the overall task down into smaller chunks makes it more achievable and can stop it from becoming quite so overwhelming. Don't be afraid to take a break from it too, especially if it's starting to create more stress.

Think about what items you really want to keep and that you need to find a home for. For everything else, decide whether it has to be thrown away, repaired, sold or donated, and keep these in different piles. You can then tackle each pile one at a time. You may need to plan a trip to a local landfill site, list items on a local Facebook marketplace or free sharing site, or pop into your local charity shop. This process can be quite cathartic; you are physically letting go of things that have caused you stress, but if you can donate items to help others too, then this can give you a sense of satisfaction. It makes it easier to give items away if you know that they are going to a good place to help someone else.



WHEN TO ASK FOR HELP

There are times when clutter builds up to an unsustainable level and you feel that you're unable to get on top of it. This is the time to get help from a professional, who can help you to get to the bottom of why you have clutter and what is stopping you from dealing with it. This may be treated with a form of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), which can help you to explore your thoughts, feelings and actions around clutter. It can also help you to talk through things like an emotional attachment to items, guilt around clearing things out, or any stress and anxiety that might be holding you back.

For some people, however, clutter is a by-product of another issue or disorder. Hoarding disorder is not the same thing as having a lot of clutter. It is a mental health condition where a person acquires an excessive number of things, with no space to store them and an inability to get rid of them. Some people with hoarding disorder are not aware that they have a problem and feel unaffected by the clutter. Others, however, find it too overwhelming to deal with and may feel a lot of shame and guilt, while being unable to clear the clutter themselves. Often it is a family member or friend who notices the signs of a hoarding disorder and tries to help.

Hoarding disorder becomes a problem when the level of clutter is significant enough to interfere with everyday life or is causing a lot of distress. It's not known what causes hoarding disorder, but it can be triggered by stressful life events, having a family history of hoarding, having had a lack of possessions growing up, or never having learnt the skills to sort and order items.

Hoarding disorder can also be associated with other mental health conditions, such as severe depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) or psychotic disorders.

“IT TAKES TIME TO BUILD UP CLUTTER, OVER MANY YEARS IN MOST CASES, SO IT'S NOT GOING TO BE SOLVED STRAIGHT AWAY”

When you have decluttered, spend some time organising the space so that it works for you. Think about the objects you often need to have to hand and ensure they are placed in the most accessible, easy-to-locate places, and don't be afraid to display those things that mean something to you. If you've decided to keep an item, it has a purpose, whether that's because it's useful or because it brings you joy in another way.

Every time you finish a space, take the time to reflect on the process and how you feel. Do you find the space more inviting now? Do you want to spend more time in it? Do you feel calmer and happier? Hold

on to those feelings, as this will help you to reduce your clutter going forward.

Moving forward with a new mindset

Once you've completed your initial declutter, the challenge is in maintaining it going forward and not allowing a state of clutter to build up again. This will mean changing your mindset and scheduling regular check-ins with yourself to ensure that your environment remains the way you need it to be.

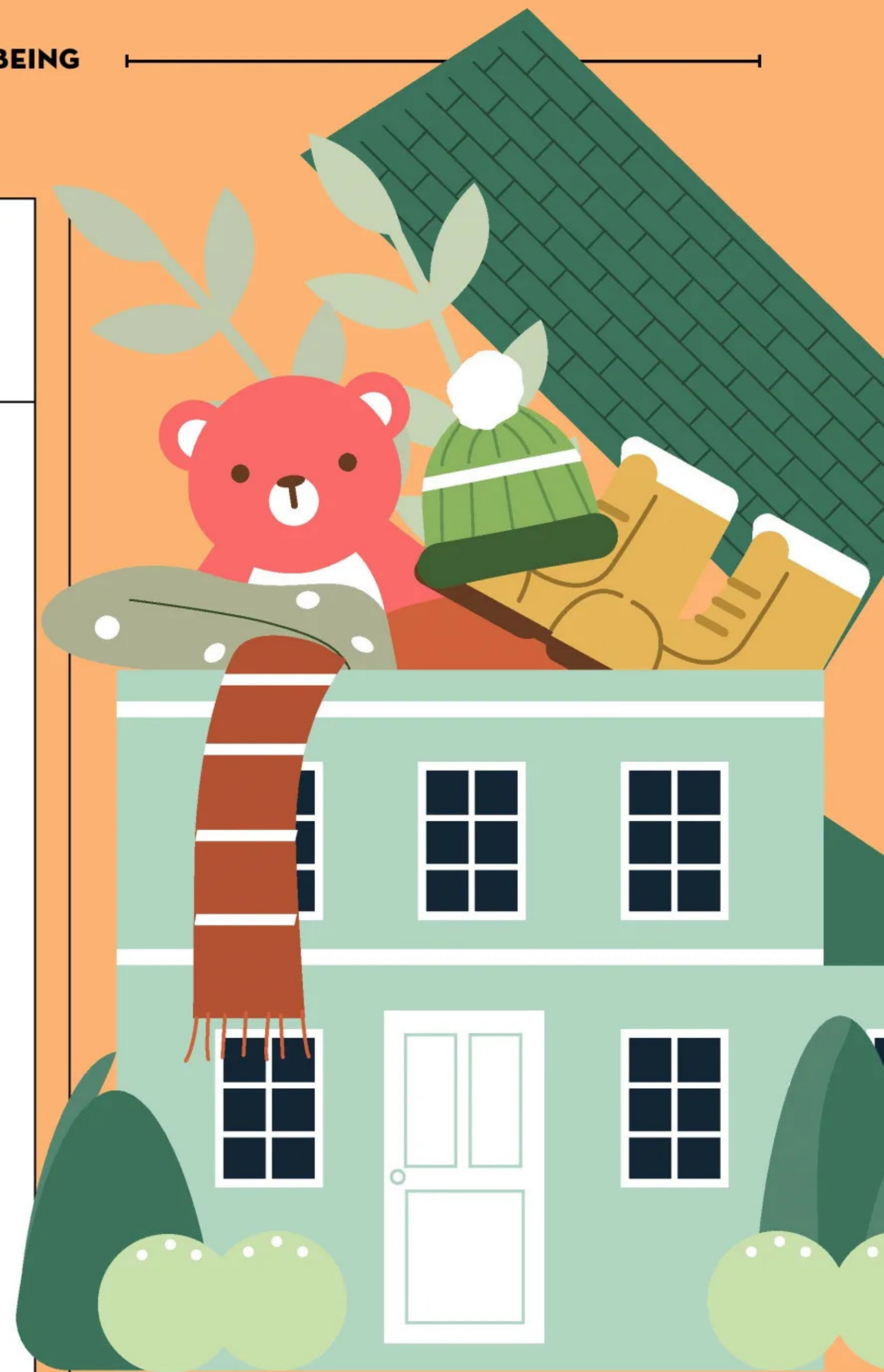
You may find it helpful to routinely check areas for clutter. Knowing what we do about the link between clutter

and mental health, a quick declutter from time to time is an act of self-care, proactively dealing with a known stressor before it becomes too much to handle.

You may also find it helpful to set some rules for yourself around what you bring into your home in the future. Try to practise a more mindful approach to purchasing. When you want to buy a new item, take a moment to consider where it will go, whether it fits in with your style, whether you really need it and if you already have something similar. It can be helpful to set yourself a 24-hour cooling-off period where you walk away, or log off if you're online, to consider the purchase, then if you still want it the next day, you can go back for it. This helps to cut down on impulsive spending, which can result in new clutter and ensures that you only buy things that you really love or need.

You may have some lapses in your journey. If you feel yourself getting stressed or overwhelmed again by clutter, remember that you have been through this process before and focus on the improvements that you felt in your mental health when you were on top of things. This can be enough to motivate you to get back on track.

By changing your mindset towards clutter and the items in your home, you are showing respect for your environment and for your own mental health, which makes decluttering an empowering choice for your wellbeing. ■



Exclusive

INTERVIEW

Dilly Carter

Television personality, author and professional organiser Dilly Carter talks to Psychology Now group editor Sarah Bankes about the importance of decluttering

Have you always been very tidy and organised?

The house I grew up in was so chaotic. I used to escape to my neighbours' houses a lot of the time, and their houses were lovely and ordered, so I realised that not everyone lived like I did! Their homes weren't like ours, and I wondered why. The order of my neighbours' houses was the way I liked to be, so they became the places that I liked to escape to - my happy places - and I wanted to know how I could create that order in my own home.

So as I got older, my bedroom was always really neat and tidy. There was barely anything in it, but the rest of the house was still chaotic. I'd always help and tidy up where I could, but my mum and dad were very messy people and the house was low down on their priority list. It wasn't something they paid too much attention to.

“MY PARENTS DIDN'T REALISE THAT THE CHAOS THEY WERE LIVING IN WAS SERIOUS AND IMPACTING MY MUM'S STATE OF MIND”



How did you realise there was a link between our surroundings and our mental health?

I understood the link between someone's physical environment and their mind early on in my life. Both my parents worked themselves into the ground. I blame my dad for working my mum into the ground. I think that the fact they worked together was a detriment to my mum's mental health, and the fact that all they did was work and not focus on anything else meant they never really lived. I don't think they ever really enjoyed the fruits of their labour. Because my mum was so stressed and tired, it made her mental health decline. The house was getting worse, her mental health was getting worse, and then when her mental health really took a toll and she was first sectioned when I was 11, it then never really got back up

to speed. My mum was ill for the rest of my life and very up and down. As soon as I could escape that chaos, I did, so I moved out when I was 18 because I didn't want to be around it anymore. My parents were moving to the West Country, and I didn't want to go with them so I didn't.

I don't think my parents ever saw their messy environment as a problem. I think they thought it was a bit untidy, but probably didn't realise that the chaos they were living in was quite serious and impacting my mum's state of mind. The house was never something they took pride in. There were only ever little snippets of organisation, but they were rare.

We had a family cottage in Constantine and that was always immaculate. We would rent it out but were hardly ever there - it was somewhere we'd escape to in the summer sometimes, but then we'd come home to the chaos of our house.

Were your parents aware of the impact their surroundings was having on them?

They just worked all the time and weren't interested in the house at all. They couldn't even see the chaos. I think they just thought they were working to provide an amazing future for me. Maybe I didn't even realise it back then, but I knew that I liked order, like other people's houses. The whole time I lived with my parents, they never decorated; they never did anything to the house. It was always the same.

I don't think my mum knew where to start. Because she was so busy working all the time, she didn't think the house mattered

and they never enjoyed it. They'd rarely have guests, but when they did have guests there was a huge rigmarole of clearing the dining room table for it to be a nice place. It wasn't a horrible place by any means - it just wasn't ordered. We lived on a lovely road - we had a lake at the back of our garden. We and some of the neighbours could all get onto this fishing lake from our back gardens and it was stunning. So it was the most beautiful house on the most beautiful road, but inside was chaos.

How did you notice your mother's mental health change when you started to help her declutter?

You could see the light lifting in her eyes. I sorted her house out several times, but the last time I did it, each time she came into the kitchen and could see it improving she'd say, "Oh my goodness, this looks nice." It's often not until you do these things for people that they realise that actually this space is so much better now. When they're in it they're so immersed in it that they can't see past what they're in.

Lockdown taught us that we need to look at our houses under a better light. Before, we might have been out of the house at 7am and not back until 7pm, but when we were in lockdown we were forced to sit there and suddenly we're looking around us on Zoom calls thinking, 'Is this what this room is like? I hadn't even noticed that this needed doing'. Suddenly everything was under a microscope and it made us appreciate our space.

Why is it so important to have ordered homes?

We spend so much time in our houses, so it's important that we enjoy the space we're living in, and we like being in the space we're living in. It's also important that we function well, because when we're surrounded by things and our judgement is clouded by 'things', we don't enjoy the space because we can never really see it and truly appreciate it.

When we're house hunting, nine times out of ten if we walk into a house and it's cluttered and messy, we'll be put off it. It takes a lot to look past the clutter and see a vision at the end of it. Most people will remember it as cluttered and horrible. But when you walk into a house that's ordered, you think, 'This is it!' because it's either the opposite of what you live in, it's what you want to be in, or it's what you strive for your home to eventually be like. We like space. When we go on holiday, what we love is the feeling of walking into a hotel room and it being lovely and clear. There's nothing in the wardrobe; you've brought your capsule wardrobe with you - the edit of what you really love to wear on holiday - so you're not overwhelmed by anything and that has »

“ WE SPEND SO MUCH TIME IN OUR HOUSES, SO IT'S IMPORTANT WE ENJOY THE SPACE WE'RE LIVING IN, AND WE LIKE BEING IN THE SPACE ”



Decanting food into jars and labelling the jars means you can see exactly what you've got

© Alamy

Dilly is the professional organiser on BBC One's *Sort Your Life Out*, where she helps families take back control



© Alamy

SORT YOUR LIFE OUT

Dilly is one quarter of the hit BBC One show *Sort Your Life Out*. Starring alongside presenter Stacey Solomon, carpenter Rob and cleaner Iwan, professional organiser Dilly takes the lead in helping families to declutter, organise and transform their homes. Each episode features a person or family living amongst total chaos. Dilly and the rest of the team help box up their belongings, which are then transported and emptied into a warehouse, where they are laid out and organised into categories. While the family has two days to sift through everything (from hair scrunchies to saucepans) and place them into 'keep', 'recycle', 'donate' or 'sell' piles, the team of experts are busy making the family's home as functional as possible. From using existing furniture to build new, more purposeful pieces to labelling jars of food, there is a real focus on upcycling and sustainability as well as making the homes look beautiful too. Visit BBC iPlayer to stream episodes.

“LOOK AT HOW YOUR LIVING SPACE IS AFFECTING YOUR RELATIONSHIPS”

such a huge impact on the way we feel. The reason we love holidays is because we have the minimal amount of stuff with us, not just the minimal amount of possessions, but also stress. None of it comes with us, we let it all go.

We always want to find that blend of aesthetically pleasing but also practical. We want a space to work, not just to look pretty. My original tagline when I started my business was 'I don't just make it pretty, I make it work'. And that's so important. Your house has to be functional and work for everyone in the family.

WHAT IS BIPOLAR?

Dilly has spoken out about her mother's struggle with bipolar, and how changing her mother's physical environment helped enormously in managing her condition.

Bipolar is a mental health condition, more specifically a 'mood' condition, that causes a person's mood to shift from an extreme high to an extreme low. These emotional episodes can last for days, weeks or even longer, and it can be very difficult to manage, both for the person suffering from the condition and their loved ones.

Previously known as 'manic depression', when a person's mood shifts from depression and feelings of sadness or hopelessness to mania and energetic feelings of euphoria or unusual irritability, the sudden shift can be distressing and lead to further issues, affecting things like sleep, energy levels, behaviour and the ability to think clearly.

Bipolar disorder can be inherited and is a lifelong condition, but symptoms can be managed. The important thing is to seek medical help. If you have any symptoms of depression, contact your doctor or mental health professional to talk about how to manage it.

You say that changing your space is a process that requires a shift in mindset. What advice do you have on shifting your mindset, especially for those of us who might find it more challenging?

The most important thing to consider when you're working out what to do and whether you need to take back control is to look at how your living space is affecting your relationships within the house. If it's starting to affect your relationships, that's when you know it needs to change. That's when you know that change has to happen in order for you to improve your space. Look at what's affecting you the most in terms of what needs to change immediately, for example if your children can't sit down to do their homework anywhere because there's no space; you can't work anywhere because there's no spare room to have an office; you can barely get in and out of bed without tripping over stuff; you can't find anything to wear in your wardrobe because it's so chaotic. You may not realise quite how much it's affecting your relationships, but think about it - if you or your partner aren't able to find stuff in the morning, it might result in you shouting or getting angry with each other because there are no clean clothes, or you don't know what's clean and what's not - these are all negatives in a relationship because they're usually associated with blame, like 'You haven't done the washing', or 'You haven't done the ironing'. There's no order. Perhaps your kids can't find their pyjamas or school uniform... So look at what's affecting you right now - is it that the bedroom feels so miserable that you barely want to sleep in it let alone anything else, because it's not inviting?

The important message is: how does your home make you feel? Always have »



When Dilly organised her mother's home, she could see her mental health dramatically improve

© Dilly Carter

that vision of how you want to change that space, and think about how it's affecting your relationships. Then when you start thinking about how it's affecting your relationships, that's when you'll be able to change your mindset and think 'Okay, I do need to do something about this'.

We go through life collecting things - is there a balance between clutter and comfort, and how can we successfully create this balance without stripping away our identity or all our possessions?

If you're a true collector of books, for example, you'll have your books organised; you won't have them in 20 piles all around the house. Someone who loves their books will create shelving for them. Someone who loves handbags will have displays of their handbags. Someone who loves shoes will have a shoe wall somewhere. Even if they live in a one-bedroom flat, they will have created a space for them because they love them. When you love things, you display them and look after them. You can't claim to be a lover of fashion when all your handbags are chucked at the bottom of the wardrobe collecting dust. You can't claim to be a lover of trainers when all your trainers are piled up on top of each other. If you love these things, you treasure them, display them and take pride in them. There's a big difference between being a true collector and someone who collects things for no reason.

We live in a throw-away culture these days. Is this partly to blame for the amount of 'stuff' we have, and do we need to change our attitude towards shopping?

Everything is too easy now. We need to train ourselves to change the way we shop. We need to be buying quality over quantity. We need to change our mindsets and not always be buying things. Also, we have this tendency to fill every space in our homes, especially when we move to a new, bigger home, but this isn't necessary. Enjoy the space! Enjoy having the space to breathe, to live, for your children to run around the house, to not fill it with toys and be tripping up over things. There are studies that show that children with fewer toys play with those toys for longer periods than those who have 200 toys, because they treasure those few toys. They can focus better and their attention spans are better - they don't need a variety of 200 toys.

Do you have advice for people wanting to help loved ones who might be resistant to change or very sentimental? Are there ways to encourage them to let go of things?

The most important thing is to start small. If you're helping a relative or elderly parent

“ WE NEED TO CHANGE THE WAY WE SHOP. WE NEED TO BE BUYING QUALITY OVER QUANTITY, AND NOT CONSTANTLY BUYING ‘THINGS’ ”

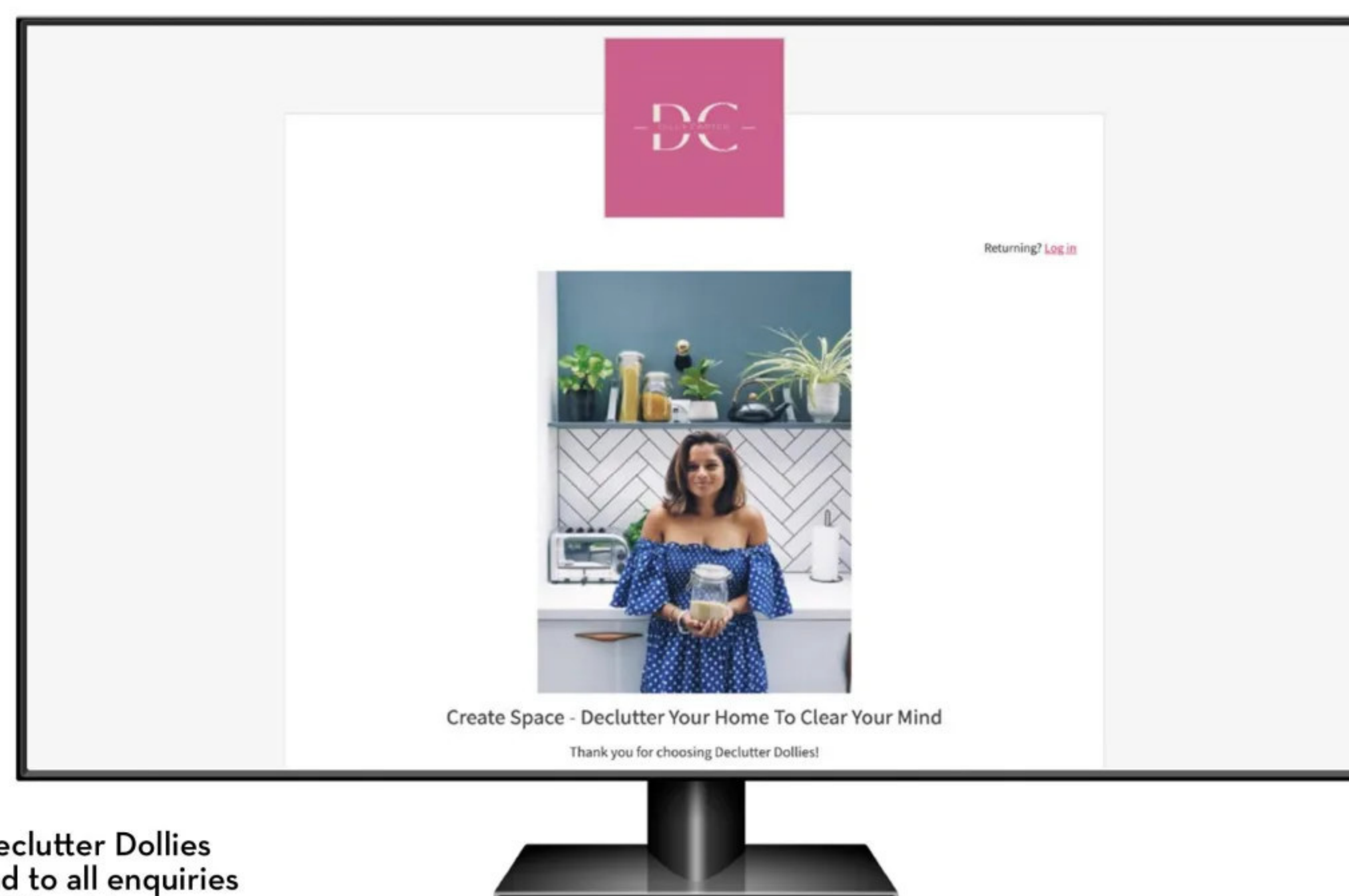


Dilly encourages her clients to buy quality products, whether it's food, clothes or toys

© Alamy

DECLUTTER DOLLIES

Dilly's 'Declutter Dollies' business offers a variety of services from decluttering, organising and home styling to home moving and even personal shopping. Follow Declutter Dollies on instagram at @declutterdollies



Someone at Declutter Dollies aims to respond to all enquiries or bookings within 48 hours



When at home, Dilly gets the whole family involved, including her young daughter, who loves tidying up!

to declutter, start with small things and things that don't have sentimental value or that they don't have an attachment to. It's also important to have those conversations with them. So many people guess what their parents want or don't want, or what they like or don't like, because they never actually ask them what pieces of furniture they treasure or what they no longer need. So rather than telling them what they need to be getting rid of, ask them questions and have a two-way conversation. Ask them what the non-negotiables are or if something were to happen to them, what they would like to keep in the family. It's important to have those conversations while your family are still able to have them, because when they're no longer able and you're left to deal with it all, that's when you struggle because you have no idea what was important to them.

You end up feeling an enormous sense of guilt with every decision you make, worrying about what they'd feel if they could see you getting rid of their things, whereas if you'd had those conversations you'd be very aware of the things that meant something versus the things that didn't. It makes that process so much easier.

What do you find challenging in your own home on a day-to-day basis?

My home is very neat and tidy. Everything has a place and I know where everything is. But like most houses and most families, my home can get messy. There can be clothes everywhere. My daughter might not always put her clothes back in the wardrobe, she might leave them on the floor, or there might be paper and drawings everywhere. But everything does have a place, so when I tidy

CHANGE YOUR SPACE

Dilly's latest book, *Change Your Space*, is the perfect guide to help you transform your space and get your life back on track. It includes more about Dilly's personal journey and the impact clutter has on the mind. It also has heaps of practical tips and advice on decluttering, tidying and much more. *Change Your Space* is available now (£16.99/\$21, Welbeck).

TV's Decluttering Expert

DILLY CARTER



CHANGE YOUR SPACE

Reclaim Your Home, Your Time and Your Mind

up, it's very quick. It doesn't take me hours to do anything. I can blitz it easily and catch up with all my housework in a day - tidying, cleaning and getting everything back on track.

My daughter loves organisation - everything in her bedroom is labelled. She does it all herself and loves it!

Discover more at www.dillycarter.co.uk

WHAT'S Holding YOU BACK?

*Want to clear away the obstacles that are
stopping you from moving forward?
The answer is in your hands – here's how*

WORDS FAITH HILL

Life can feel like a game of chess – do we make this move or that one? Do we take a risk or play it safe? Sometimes we know what is holding us back from taking a step forward; sometimes we have no idea. Often it is something within us that we have the power to change. Performance psychologist Gerry Hussey gives us six tips for moving past those mental roadblocks.

1 LET GO OF FEAR
Fear – of change, failure, rejection or the unknown – can really hold you back. Yet fear is just a thought, created in your mind. When faced with fear, you can easily overestimate the challenge ahead and underestimate your abilities. You unconsciously set limits to what is possible, which in turn perpetuates the fear. **DO IT** Knowing what is – and isn't – within your control helps you to reduce the intensity of fear. "Control that which is within your control and let everything else go," advises Gerry. For example, if you have

fear about attending a new social event, remember what you are in control of – for example, what you wear, who you talk to, how much you spend and what time you leave."

2 DON'T GET STUCK IN THE PAST
Each time you think about an event from your past, such as an unresolved trauma or business failure, your brain doesn't know if the event is happening again or if you are just remembering it. It creates the same physical, mental, emotional and physiological responses as the original experience. "This is the state of the 'frozen present'," says Gerry. "As long as you are trapped and imprisoned in it, your thinking and happiness can be no different than they were at the time of trauma." **DO IT** The practice of forgiveness is extremely helpful in order to move on. Gerry suggests writing a letter to someone involved to say they are forgiven. Maybe it is even a self-addressed letter, forgiving yourself.



GERRY HUSSEY

is a performance psychologist who has worked in the fields of health and performance for 20 years. He shares his personal journey in *Awaken Your Power Within* (£14.99/\$18.50, Hachette Books Ireland).

3 LIVE YOUR BEST LIFE
Just like living in the past, worrying about the future can stop you from living your best life now, in the present. "We get caught up in the immediate," says Gerry. "We never reflect and make the required changes to the important things." **DO IT** Gerry has a daily mantra that will help to draw you back to the present. Ask yourself, 'What's Important Now?' Use the memorable acronym: 'WIN'.



4 REALISE YOUR POTENTIAL

Most of your adult beliefs about yourself were developed during the first eight years of your life. These beliefs determine what you do in adulthood. You are capable of achieving the life you want. "Most of us don't take time to ask the bigger questions," reflects Gerry.

DO IT Make a vision board - a collage of images, words and ideas that represents the best version of you and your aspirations for life. Take a large sheet of paper and on it glue pictures and quotes cut from magazines. Put it up in a visible place to inspire you. "Visualisation is a powerful practice to build greater inner resilience, motivation and performance, and helps manifest your goals, dreams and desires," says Gerry.

5 CHANGE THE PERSONALITY 'LABELS' YOU GIVE YOURSELF

Your brain creates labels to help it to organise your thoughts, experiences and memories. Without awareness, you label yourself in an unhelpful manner, such as being uncreative, the quiet type or a bad sleeper. You say phrases such as 'This is just the way I am' or 'That's my personality type'. These self-created labels hold you back. "We dismiss and suppress our true self in the fear that it is not enough and, in doing so, we suppress our dreams, our passions, and we deny ourselves the life we deserve," says Gerry.

DO IT Gerry has three self-enquiry questions to help you break free from self-limiting labels: 'Are these stories and beliefs serving me well? Are they opening my mind and my heart or are they closing them? And are these the stories I want to spend the rest of my life listening to, and living from, or is it time to change the record?' The answer is in your hands.

6 ACCEPT AND LOVE YOURSELF

The starting point of positive transformation is loving yourself for who you are right now. It creates a basis of love and acceptance, rather than one of fear and rejection. From a young age, your brain learns mind-based skills such as comparison with others and self-judgement, which can have a negative effect on your sense of self-worth. However, you also have the ability to learn more helpful, positive skills such as self-compassion and self-love. "It is important we ask ourselves from time to time which part of ourselves

“CONTROL THAT WHICH IS WITHIN YOUR CONTROL”

we are rejecting and which part of our uniqueness we are strangling," says Gerry.

DO IT Face yourself in the mirror every day. Take a deep breath in and a nice slow exhale out. Look into your eyes and repeat loving affirmations such as 'I am a kind person', 'I honour my caring heart', 'I love and respect myself', 'I am willing to love myself' and 'I am enough'. "The very act of being able to look in the mirror and feel love and pride towards the person you see is the single most transformative step you will ever take," says Gerry. ■

THE Healthcare GENDER BIAS

The stark inequality that exists in healthcare and the treatment of women is costing lives. We take a look at why the healthcare gender bias is happening

WORDS NATALIA LUBOMIRSKI

Despite Emmeline Pankhurst's best efforts to achieve equal rights for women more than a century ago, women are still fighting for equality in job opportunities, pay packets and even healthcare.

At best, this is frustrating, but it can have serious consequences. "Gender bias in healthcare can have a significant negative impact on diagnosis and quality of healthcare women receive," says Dr Elinor Cleghorn, author of *Unwell Women - A Journey Through Medicine and Myth in a Man-Made World* (£9.99/\$12, Orion Publishing Co). Even though women are living longer than men, women have a higher rate of ill health during their lifetime, and it's thought gender discrimination is a contributor.

Why is this happening? What impact is it having on women's health and what can we do to ensure women are treated fairly? Here's what you need to know...

Historical problem

When the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) has to tell the NHS to 'listen to women' in response to the

treatment of endometriosis, you know there are fundamental flaws in the system.

"Gender bias rears its head most prominently when women seek help for conditions that are seen as 'women's problems'," explains Dr Cleghorn. "Menstrual disorders and the menopause, as well as conditions such as endometriosis and uterine fibroids, are still often seen as inevitable consequences of living in a female body that should be tolerated, rather than medical issues deserving of understanding, care and knowledge."

This inequality in women's healthcare goes back to the foundations of modern medicine. "For centuries, women were viewed primarily as child bearers, meaning understanding of their illnesses and health conditions centred around reproduction," explains Dr Cleghorn. Knowledge of their own bodies was often not taken seriously.

Sexist stereotyping

"When 'hysterical' diagnoses of women took hold during the 19th century, the reality of what was actually wrong was often eclipsed by the dominant idea that women's pain and other symptoms were



caused by their 'weak nerves' and 'unruly emotions'," explains Dr Cleghorn.

Although hysteria is no longer a medical diagnosis, there's still a negative bias that exists today when it comes to listening to women's symptoms. »

“FOR CENTURIES, WOMEN
WERE VIEWED PRIMARILY AS
CHILD BEARERS”





The idea that women are more emotional and anxious compared to men often influences how women are seen when they talk about their bodies, pain and health.

A study by the University of Gothenburg and Chalmers University of Technology found doctors often view men with chronic pain as 'brave' or 'stoic', but women as 'emotional' or 'hysterical'. Another survey* found that many healthcare professionals believe women exaggerate their pain.

"When a woman reports pain to a GP or healthcare provider, they're statistically more likely to have their symptoms dismissed as psychological, rather than physiological," says Dr Cleghorn. "Women are also more likely to be offered sedatives or antidepressants as treatment for pain-causing conditions, whereas men are given pain-relieving medication."

Holes in research

Gender bias is not only present between patients and doctors, but also medical research and policies that govern it. Pre-1990, many scientists believed males made the best test subjects, as they didn't have menstrual cycles or become pregnant. "It was considered too expensive and difficult to conduct drug trials that would accommodate women's hormone changes," says Dr Cleghorn. Following the thalidomide scandal, women of reproductive age - even when childfree and on long-term contraception - were excluded from trials because of potential dangers.

It wasn't until the early '90s that the National Institutes of Health (NIH) required

researchers to include women in their clinical trials. Previously, they'd studied white men and applied findings to the rest of the population. But there are vital differences, which can influence everything from symptoms to how drugs and therapies work.

While many pre-1990s' studies are now deemed flawed, there's still a lack of female representation. The *British Medical Journal* reported that, according to a 2018 study, phase 1 clinical trials are still biased with women making up only 22%. This has led to a "massive blind spot in understanding women's health," explains Dr Cleghorn. Similarly, under-representation of women in prominent research and leadership roles is contributing to the ongoing misunderstanding between doctors and patients.

Why it matters

This gender bias is having devastating repercussions on female health. When doctors don't take a woman's symptoms seriously, it can result in diagnoses delays, as well as misdiagnosis, and even death. A 2019 Danish study found that in 72% of cases, women waited longer than men for a diagnosis. Typically, women are diagnosed two and a half years later for cancer and four and a half years later for diabetes.

If women feel challenged to prove their symptoms and pain levels, it can also lead to a mistrust in patients. "It can be demoralising, even traumatising, to feel your symptoms are being dismissed or not taken seriously," says Dr Cleghorn. They might make fewer doctor visits, which means they miss out on vital testing and treatment.

Changing attitudes

A review by the University of Geneva in 2017 was still finding variations in how doctors diagnosed and treated female patients, with some asking fewer questions or prescribing less medication. However, Dr Cleghorn believes the situation is improving.

Education about what gender bias is and recognising it within the medical profession is key to eliminating it. Fundamentally, "doctors need to listen to women patients to piece together what might be causing their symptoms," says Dr Cleghorn. Creating standardised, unbiased treatment guidelines that all medical professionals follow could also help.

And what can you do? "While women shouldn't be responsible for ensuring they're treated fairly, there are ways women can

THE BIG DIVIDE

The conditions experiencing the starkest gender bias

HEART DISEASE

The idea that heart attacks mainly occur in males, plus the lack of awareness surrounding female symptoms, contributes to higher death rates in women**. Doctors are also less likely to refer females with suspected heart disease for diagnostic tests and treatment***.

DEMENTIA

Women make fewer visits than men to the doctor, receive less monitoring, and take more potentially harmful medication****.

ENDOMETRIOSIS

"The myth that women should just 'grin and bear' pain - especially menstruation pain - means initial symptoms are often dismissed," says Dr Cleghorn. "An endometriosis diagnosis takes around eight years in the UK."

COVID-19

Women with confirmed cases of COVID-19 are less likely than men to have chest X-rays and blood tests*****.

advocate for themselves," says Dr Cleghorn. If you believe you're receiving inadequate care, don't be afraid to ask for a second or third opinion. Keep a detailed log of your symptoms, including details about severity, when you experience them and for how long. Take a friend with you to appointments, ask why a doctor isn't pursuing tests or treatments, and report discrimination.

"We need to start putting women's health and wellbeing at the top of the agenda," says Dr Cleghorn. "This means empowering women to speak freely about their bodies, offering support in the workplace and at home, and ensuring their voices and concerns are always listened to and taken seriously." ■

“HEALTH PROFESSIONALS BELIEVE WOMEN EXAGGERATE THEIR PAIN”

WHY IT'S GOOD TO Cry

*Sometimes a proper
blub is the best thing we can do
to improve our mood*

WORDS DEBRA WATERS

If you've ever found yourself crying at an advert or a scene in a soap opera, for example, you may have been accused of being a tad too emotional. But we cry for a reason and, as the saying goes, it's better out than in. In fact, it can do us the world of good.

Surprisingly, scientists don't really know what goes on inside us when we cry. "We know that crying is a parasympathetic reaction [the parasympathetic nervous system is our rest-and-digest function], but we're not yet certain whether this activity is the cause or the result of the crying," says clinical psychologist Professor Ad Vingerhoets. Here's what we do know about crying's ability to help and heal...

The power of tears

Aside from the fact that crying makes us feel better - one study found that 50% of participants reported an improvement in their mood after shedding tears - people are more likely to reach out to us, and even like us more, if they see us upset.

"It stimulates empathy in others, so that they're more willing to provide support and comfort," says Professor Vingerhoets. "To put it differently, tears connect." Research reveals that tearful people are seen as warmer, nicer, more reliable and honest. "They are the kind of people we want as friends, neighbours and colleagues," he says. "We consider them as fit for 'reliable' professions such as doctor, teacher and police officer."

Release the pressure

Although one in ten people will feel worse after crying, and some will get a headache or sore eyes, many of us benefit from the experience.

"Crying is our body's way of releasing emotion - a feeling, a pressure, something you've been holding in," explains psychotherapist Anna Mathur, author of *Know Your Worth* (£14.99/\$18.50, Waterstones). "When we hold a lot of emotions, we can become like a pressure cooker, until our body finds a way to let things go. You might feel tempted to rationalise tears when they flow over something seemingly insignificant, but try to respect this feeling until it passes."

It helps to heal

Have you noticed how, after crying, you feel calmer and more clear headed? Or that shedding a few tears after stubbing your toe makes the pain go away more quickly? This is because of your body's response to crying. "By letting tears go, you are welcoming a release of happy hormones - endorphins and oxytocin - which can induce anti-stress-like effects, such as a reduction of blood pressure and cortisol levels," says Anna. "These endorphins also interact with receptors in your brain, which can even reduce your perception of pain." ■

TAKING CONTROL

IF IT'S NOT A GOOD TIME TO CRY...

It's not unusual for us to feel embarrassed when we cry. "If we're afraid that observers don't consider crying an appropriate reaction to a situation, we experience distress," says Professor Vingerhoets.

- Try not to panic - instead, focus on breathing in through your nose, holding for two seconds, then breathing out slowly through pursed lips. This will steady your breath and help you regain control.
- Touching the roof of your mouth with your tongue or pinching yourself may also curb crying.

DON'T FEEL BETTER?

If you're crying more than feels cathartic, or your emotions feel overwhelming for more than two weeks, see your doctor, says Anna. Persistent tearfulness can be a sign of depression or anxiety.



SEPARATENESS AS A PRECONDITION FOR Connection

Expectations in romantic relationships are higher than ever. Love has never been so paradoxical. So how can we balance our need for togetherness alongside our need for separateness?

WORDS LEAH LARWOOD

We are living in a remarkable age - especially when it comes to eroticism. We're living longer than ever before, and in many cases, looking to the same person to give us security, stability, identity, pleasure and spontaneity. It's a paradox. Never before have our expectations of romantic relationships taken on such ambitious proportions.

Esther Perel is a Belgian-American psychotherapist, known for her work on human relationships. Perel promotes the concept of 'erotic intelligence' in her book *Mating in Captivity: Unlocking Erotic Intelligence*. During her research she has explored the paradox of love and sex. She unpicks how we crave the depth and beauty of a love-filled relationship, yet we also desire a spontaneous and adventurous sex life.

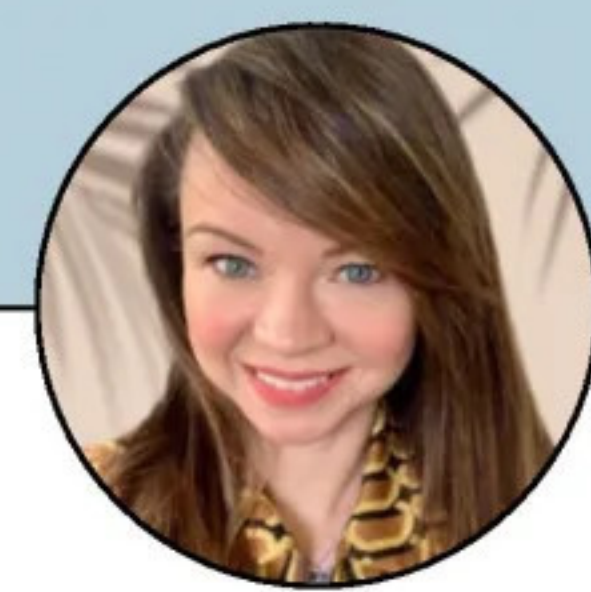
Historically, sexual problems were often deemed as a relational problem, and it was said that if you fix the

relationship, sex will follow. However, in Perel's experience, the relationship would improve but things in the bedroom would not necessarily change. Noticing this inspired her to research the nature of erotic desire in long-term relationships.

She observed that this is the first time in history where we are trying to experience sexuality in the long-term, and not because we need to procreate hordes of children to support the household and wider family or community. It's the first time we want sex that is rooted in desire rather than concerned with procreation.

Understanding separateness

In psychology, separateness refers to the development of the individual as a self-contained and independent unit. It also points to individuation, differentiation, and autonomy - each of these are developmental achievements that lead to a stable sense of self as separate with a clear sense of goals and values.



DR SARAH BISHOP

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DR ALISON MCCLYMONT

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DR LISA STROHMAN

Dr Strohmman is a clinical psychologist, attorney and also the founder of Digital Citizen Academy - an organisation focused on eliminating issues such as cyber-bullying, child luring, sextortion, and suicide through prevention and diversion programs, events and resources. She is author of *Unplug: Raising Kids In A Technology Addicted World*, and co-author of *Digital Distress: Growing Up Online*.

DRLISASTROHMAN.COM

Specifically, the key element of Jungian psychology is individuation, which is similar to separateness - the physiological, psychological, and sociocultural processes by which a person attains status as an individual human being and exerts themselves as such in the world.

Defining human connection

Human connection is the sense of closeness and belongingness a person can experience when having supportive relationships

with those around them. Connection is when two or more people interact with each other and each person feels valued, seen and heard. Human connection is an important part of what we need - not only does it lead to increased fulfilment but also improved quality of life.

Two needs: security and adventure

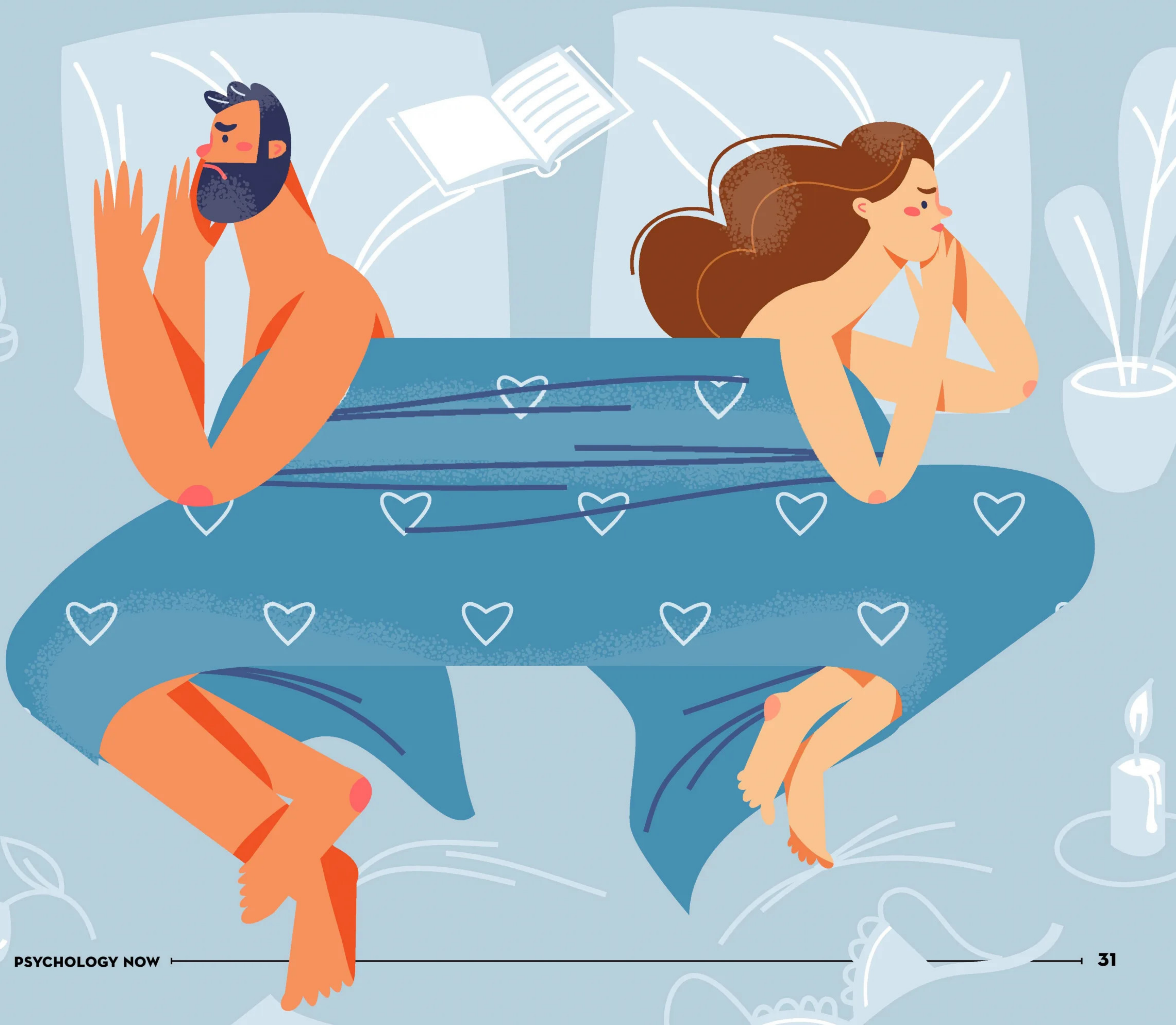
In her work, Perel wanted to know what it is about our generation that wants desire for one another so much but doesn't always

have it. What sustains desire and why is it so difficult? What are the fears and obstacles that stand in the way of passion and excitement?

Fundamentally, when it comes to romantic relationships we have two human needs. There's the need for predictability, safety, dependability and permanence - all the anchoring experiences. But we also have a strong need for adventure, novelty, mystery, risk, change and surprise. We want our partner to give us all of these things, and be our best friend, as well as our passionate partner, all while we are living far longer than we were a hundred years ago.

In her famous TED Talk, 'The Secret to Desire in a Long-term Relationship', Perel is famous for unravelling how we are now asking one person to give us what a village once gave us. She says that we ask »

“ WE ARE NOW ASKING ONE PERSON TO GIVE US WHAT A WHOLE VILLAGE ONCE GAVE US ”



our partner to: "Give me belonging, give me identity, give me continuity, and give me transcendence, mystery and awe all in one. Give me comfort, give me edge, give me novelty, give me familiarity, give me predictability, give me surprise."

However, Perel has noted that when people become fused, authentic connection can become harder - and then there is no one to connect with. Therefore, separateness

is a precondition for connection. So how can we achieve this when we crave both security and closeness?

The psychology of confluence

Another way to examine this paradox of human connection and separateness is by exploring the idea of confluence - a term used in psychology to describe the process of flowing into one another between two or

more people. In confluence, depending on the degree, there can be a loss of perception or denial of differences between people.

In geographical terms, confluence describes the place where two rivers merge into one. When the term is used in psychology, it carries a similar meaning whereby it explains the merging or dissolving of a person's behaviour and attitude with another's, leading to a lack of differentiation.

We can recognise confluence expressed in various ways, such as flocking together, harmony, togetherness, unions and synchronisation. However, although confluence is a natural part of daily life, sometimes it can lead to problematic situations and dynamics - such as when we become 'the same' and lose a sense of self.

Healthy versus unhealthy confluence

Beneficial functions of confluence include the act of making love or when we lose a sense of self dancing at a gig or singing in a choir. In fact, merging with the environment can feel blissful. For example, when completing a piece of work with colleagues or art with fellow creatives, we might experience times when we're in flow with others who are also in flow. Confluence is an experience that is universal and can bring joy. However, there are times when this 'togetherness' might not serve us.

Psychologist Dr Alison McClymont, based at the London Psychiatry Clinic and The Soke, explains, "When intimacy is confused with an 'ownership of the other' it melts in to a space that Esther Perel defines as fusion. Perel argues that contrary to what many couples believe, who struggle with sexual passion and drive within their relationship, it is not a lack of closeness but too much closeness that impedes desire. In other words it is not necessarily not enough connection with the other that creates a dissonance in sexual chemistry, but too much of a style of connection that forms a whole, rather than two separate parts, dancing together.

"To put this in another way, I often find myself wincing when a person says to me 'but he/she is a part of me', as what I view this as is not necessarily the intimate bonding that the person believes this to be, but enmeshment - a state of bonding where boundaries are permeable and unclear, and the self has been split and transmuted on to the separate being of another. There is no 'dance' here, there is only holding, there is no push and pull that constitutes sexual attraction, there is a death grip."

Although confluence or 'fusing' can become unhealthy, it feels important to acknowledge that it can be a helpful coping strategy for certain situations, and in others, a way of connecting and enjoying special moments with other people. At other times, what

3 TIPS FOR COUPLES BY DR SARAH BISHOP

- *View clashes and disagreements as learning opportunities.*
- *Respect your own individuality and that of your partner: you both have needs of equal importance.*
- *Stick with it. A truly secure and intimate connection takes time to build. Love is an art, which requires tending to over time and can never truly be perfected; it will require ongoing reflection and effort.*



can be useful is to observe our responses to others and to take stock of whether we might be leaning too much on their way of being, their beliefs, approach or system.

Surrender and autonomy

Perel also says that love rests on two pillars: surrender and autonomy. Commenting on this concept, Dr McClymont says, "Our need for togetherness should be equal to our need for separateness. We should not be attempting to become an amorphous blob or trying so hard to join together that we squash the sense of two separate identities co-existing. If we do this we lose the basis of desire - the yearning, the vulnerability, the 'risk'. Of course with too much distance, desire flounders as it needs the pull and dance, it needs the yearning to be satiated occasionally. But without any degree of separateness, desire also flounders - the push and the pull becomes a static way of being, the energy dwindles and flickers.

"When we lose the mystery and the enchantment of discovering and enjoying a distinct 'other', we become complacent - not simply safe, we actually become stuck. When people become fused, they don't actually become a more connected couple, as there is no one to connect with - they have merged into one from two. Thus separateness is a precondition for connection: this is the essential paradox of intimacy and sex - we need to maintain our separateness as

dance partners rather than fusing simply into being the music."

Achieving security and closeness

Sex may fade in couples who love each other and they can lose their desire - so what is the dynamic between love and desire? Can we want what we already have? Why doesn't good intimacy guarantee good sex? Perel asks all these questions, and is also famous for enquiring why it is that sex makes babies, yet babies often spell erotic disaster between couples. And is it possible to achieve both love and desire when we crave security and closeness?

Security does not have to mean possession, and safety does not have to mean ownership. It's vital we continue to have outside interests and outside friends; it's also important that we continue to try to grow as individuals. Dr McClymont explains, "In this way our partner still gets the opportunity to 'meet' us, to 'dance' with us. As we grow in our states of being and move through different ages and life experiences, we offer our dance partner entirely new steps to learn with us. Take up new hobbies, new pursuits, new studies and tell your partner about them. Let them enjoy you enjoying something outside of them. Equally, fake an interest in your partner's outside ideas and pursuits.

"Have outside friends, utilise your close friendships for other ways to express and



maintain intimate connection. This is actually incredibly healthy - your partner does not have to provide the entirety of your emotional security. It's better for the relationship if this need can be shared. Look for and explore new ways you might be sexually expressive with each other, or find new ways to 'date' each other. Make your dates special, and dress up just as you would have done in the early stages of your relationship. Find new ways to 'discover' each other, regardless of if you have been dancing together for two weeks or 25 years!"

Reconciling love and desire

These two needs come from different places and flow in different directions. The challenge, Perel states in her book, is for »

EXPLORING YOUR RIVER SEPARATENESS VERSUS TOGETHERNESS

Ultimately when assessing to what degree you have the right level of autonomy over fusion in your relationship, it's about noticing, in any given context, whether you are truly happy in these situations and if your needs are being met. Ask yourself some questions, such as:

Do I really feel this way too?

What would happen if I said how I really feel?

Do I feel safe enough to speak my truth, and if not, why not?

Pause, and ask yourself: is this mine or yours?

Where am I in all of this?

This is where awareness and perhaps some mindfulness can be helpful. Develop a sense of knowing yourself, your needs and your boundaries, and take stock of situations where you feel a bit 'swept away'. Instead, ensure your river runs far and wide, and allow it to merge with other rivers for those beautiful and beneficial moments of connection, before you branch off again into your own depths.

“YOUR
PARTNER DOES
NOT HAVE TO
PROVIDE THE
ENTIRETY OF
YOUR EMOTIONAL
SECURITY”



drawn to each other – not sexually, just drawn to one another. Her findings were universal and the majority of the responses were gender neutral. After couples had been apart, the partner felt most drawn to their other half when: they made them laugh; they surprised them; after a fight; when they were doing something they were passionate about; when they were in their own element; when they were in the garden; when they were fixing things; when they were on stage giving a talk; and when one (of both) were slightly jealous.

What is notable here is that the findings didn't show that attraction was felt when gazing into one another's eyes. It's when we look at our partner at a comfortable distance, somewhat mysterious and unknown and in that space is the erotic potential. It's important to feel comfortable with your other half doing these things. Interestingly, she also found that none of the responses were about 'care taking' – in this realm of desire there is no 'need', it's the fact the other is an independent separate person in that moment that allows you to want them. However, what is essential is that the more connected and held and safe you feel, the more able you are to express yourself.

A mature kind of love

Another viewpoint comes from clinical psychologist Dr Sarah Bishop. She says, "The concept of our conflicting desires for closeness and separateness has been

the modern couple is to reconcile these differences, to find lust in the marriage bed and to bring the erotic and domestic in the same place. The person we want to feel safe with is also the person that we want to feel as though we can be unpredictable with.

So how are you ever supposed to navigate that tension? Perel compares this task to secure attachment. It is the same as when a child makes the decision to get up from their cosy seat one day, to move about and explore everything around them. If that child has a secure base and knows they can return whenever they want to, they will feel secure enough to make the leap to explore the world. Similarly, in erotic relationships you need freedom and some degree of self-consciousness – you want to feel as though you have the freedom and adventure but also know that you can return back safely to your other.

Fire needs air: why we need separateness in order to have connection

Perel reveals one simple formula to explain the separate/connected relationship – fire needs air. Many times people don't give one another enough space to maintain that air. Fire needs otherness and distance and movement.

In Perel's research, she asked couples to consider when they found themselves most

“ YOU WANT TO FEEL AS THOUGH YOU HAVE THE FREEDOM AND ADVENTURE BUT ALSO KNOW YOU CAN RETURN SAFELY TO YOUR OTHER ”

DID YOU KNOW... 'WORK CHATS' ARE GOOD FOR COUPLES

A recent study reveals how sharing experiences about work can encourage balance in dual-earner couples and shape relationship and life satisfaction. The 2022 study from the West University of Timisoara in Romania* reveals how sharing details about your work with your partner can help them better understand and support you, and provide an opportunity to connect and bond over shared interests and experiences. They also found that couples who communicate openly and honestly about their work are more likely to have higher levels of relationship satisfaction and balance.

KEY STEPS TO SEXUALITY & INTIMACY

By US-based attorney and clinical psychologist Dr Lisa Strohman

Couple sexuality and intimacy is multi-dimensional, multi-casual and complex by its very nature. There is no right way to be intimate as this is a personal journey, less about performance and outcome and more about sharing the exquisite feelings of security, trust and mutual sexual satisfaction each time with your soul mate. As Esther Perel's theory states, there is a conflicting need for separateness and togetherness to achieve connection. Therefore, most couples' therapy focuses less on the outcome and more on building desire, pleasure, eroticism and satisfaction, to create empowered and motivated sexual partners.

There are several steps that can help in this regard:

COMMUNICATE OPENLY AND HONESTLY

Good communication is key to a healthy relationship. Talk to your partner about your desires, fantasies and expectations. Share your likes and dislikes, and be willing to listen and understand their perspective as well. This can help you both to create a more fulfilling and satisfying sexual experience.

PRIORITISE INTIMACY

Make time for intimacy in your relationship, whether it's through physical touch, sexual activity or simply spending time together. Schedule regular date nights or weekends away to keep the spark alive.

EXPERIMENT WITH NEW THINGS

Don't be afraid to try new things in the bedroom. Be adventurous and willing to explore each other's bodies and desires. This can help keep things exciting and prevent the relationship from becoming stagnant.

EMBRACE SELF-CARE

Take care of yourself physically, mentally and emotionally. When you feel good about yourself, you're more likely to feel confident and desirable, which can translate into a more satisfying sexual experience.

KEEP THE ROMANCE ALIVE

Keep the romance alive in your relationship by doing little things for each other, like leaving notes, sending thoughtful messages, or planning surprises. This can help you both to feel valued and appreciated, which can lead to a more passionate and satisfying relationship.

long recognised by psychoanalysts and philosophers. Erich Fromm, in his 1956 book *The Art of Loving*, refers to an immature love being like a completely dependent, 'symbiotic' relationship. This might be compared to a parent and infant; there is absolute closeness and recognition of every need; fuelled by a fear of the risk of what separation could cause. Of course this is a tempting fantasy, that our every need would be automatically recognised by the other but in submitting to this dynamic, there is a risk that we lose integrity due to the dependence it creates.

"In contrast with this is a 'mature love', in which both partners respect the integrity of the other and retain the individual self, instead of what Perel would call 'fusing' into one another. In mature love, both partners can come together to create a union yet they remain individual people within that union. This contrasts with immature love, where both partners are expected to surrender features of personality to blend into a dual being. A true connection therefore cannot be possible as half of the party has been swallowed by the other; how therefore can a meaningful connection exist?"

The paradox of mature love

Becoming one through love but remaining two is the paradox of mature love. Couples with a high level of respect for each other tend to find the balance between closeness and separateness more easily. In order to truly respect another individual, however, we need to acknowledge that we all have important basic needs and fears; yet due to our attachment styles these play out differently.

Dr Bishop adds, "Practise accepting that different styles within relationships are normal, and develop a curiosity and care towards this in terms of your own patterns and those of your partner. Steer away from judgement and criticism and towards understanding; every time we criticise we slip into an immature love where we are no longer viewing our partner as a unique individual."

She concludes: "We need to commit to being open to giving and receiving feedback on our relationship in a non-shaming way, and recognise that feeling vulnerable is a vital part of the process of transitioning from an immature state of 'falling in love' (which is not sustainable) to a mature love characterised by the flow of separateness and togetherness. Being more connected with you; learning about your patterns, being yourself and pursuing your individuality whilst simultaneously sharing this with openness to your partner can create a connection in which you feel deeply understood and cared for." ■

FIND YOUR Frequency

Could sound baths, the latest trend in fitness-meets-self-care, be the secret to acing your workout goals?

WORDS LOUISE PYNE

Whether you're already into your fitness or you're keen to make it more of a priority, there's no time like the present to kickstart your fitness routine. Whether that means a sweaty HIIT workout in the gym or going for a sunset jog in the park, getting your workout game on has plenty of benefits for your body and state of mind. Sound therapy has become the go-to self-care trend for those in the know, with studies showing that listening to the meditative sounds of gongs, wind chimes and tuning forks helps to boost our mood and lower stress and anxiety. The good news? This therapeutic concept is starting to be used in fitness circles to help crank up exercise sessions.

"Sound washes over you, which is why sessions that use sound therapy or sound healing are called sound baths," says Farzana Ali, a sound practitioner and founder of The Sound Therapist (@thesoundtherapist). "They work by changing your dominant brainwave in a process called sympathetic resonance. What this means is that the sounds you hear in a sound bath help your brain move from a beta-dominant brainwave state (when we're concentrating, focused or stressed) to a relaxed and restful alpha-dominant brainwave state."

Sessions are often held one on one or in groups with a qualified practitioner, who will focus on creating an orchestra of tones and frequencies. They can be pricey, so if you're struggling financially right now, it's worth scouring the internet for

discounts, or looking out for practitioners who might be offering package deals.

There are also plenty of playlists available on streaming sites such as Spotify or Apple Music; videos on YouTube; and free recordings from practitioners on social media. Or you may want to invest in your own singing bowl or set of chimes to experiment with creating meditative sounds yourself.

Here's how using these ancient instruments can help you to supercharge your workouts...

Speed up your recovery

Allocating rest days in between intense workouts is an important part of a good fitness regime, as it helps to maximise the effects of your training by allowing your muscles adequate time to repair and rebuild.

Your current recovery routine might involve stretching out tight glutes and hamstrings with a foam roller, focusing on a balanced diet and treating yourself to the odd deep-tissue massage to have post-training knots pummelled out, but it's also important to remember that recovery isn't just about nourishing your body on a physical level – your state of mind needs to be prioritised, too.

"When training and pushing your body physically, you need to rest physically, but you also need to rest mentally. If you're lying on the sofa and your mind is racing at 100 miles an hour, that's still not deep rest. You need to engage in mental rest as well to get the full benefits," says Ali.

This is where sound therapy can help to steer you in the right direction. "When we are in a state of deep rest, our brains organise what we have been

doing. Research shows that when we are mentally rested, it allows our brains to recognise and consolidate new skills that we have learnt physically – improving our physical performance too," adds Ali.

Smash your personal best

If you thrive on competing at events, you'll know that mental focus is just as important as physical prep. Switching your mind into gear helps you to push through the pain barrier to make the most of what your body can achieve. Good mental strength also helps to supercharge self-confidence and gives you a sense of purpose that can filter into other areas of your life, not just the challenge you are training for.

Listening to motivational podcasts in the run-up to your event can be immensely beneficial in helping to get you in the right headspace, and kicking back to the sounds of gongs can also help you to hone a more positive mindset that will help you ace your goals. "Sound therapy is also very useful in helping to clear negative thoughts or belief systems you



might be holding onto. This positive shift in mindset can then further instil the belief that you will be successful in any physical challenge you have set yourself," says Ali.

Push through the pain barrier

Interestingly, research shows that listening to the sounds of Tibetan singing bowls and other vibrational instruments affects the way you perceive pain, which could help you to

overcome any physical barriers that might be causing your performance to plateau.

A 2016 observational study, in particular, demonstrated that survey participants ranked their pain higher on a scale of one to five before listening to a sound bath, compared with afterwards. These positive findings are thought to be a result of the relaxation-inducing tones and frequencies of these centuries-old instruments. ■

“SOUND THERAPY IS VERY USEFUL IN HELPING TO CLEAR NEGATIVE THOUGHTS”

© Getty Images / mikievy / Aleksandra Abramova

ENJOY A SOUND BATH AT HOME

Bathe yourself in peaceful vibrations for a new level of Zen...

SET THE SCENE

Creating a tranquil environment will help you to get the most out of your sound bath. Switch off your phone, pop on some comfortable loungewear, and light some candles.

STATE AN INTENTION

Your intention might be to feel more energised for your next workout or to get past any mental blocks if you're training for an event. Try repeating a positive affirmation to help create a positive mindset – for example, 'I exercise to honour my body and mind'.

FIND A COMFORTABLE POSITION

Whether you lie stretched out in bed, cocoon yourself in blankets on the sofa, or prefer sitting cross legged in 'easy pose' (sukhasana) with your hands resting on your knees, it's important that you remain comfortable and relaxed.

SOAK UP THE SOUNDS

As you play your sound bath, keep your eyes closed and let your mind clear while you listen to the peaceful sounds of crystal singing bowls and chimes. Once the sound bath has ended, stay still for a few minutes to help settle your mind.

BEAT THE Curse OF COMPARISON



*Exhausted trying to keep up with the Joneses?
Our experts explain why it's time to stop
contrasting your life with others*

WORDS ROSE GOODMAN

Feel like you're trying to keep pace with your more adventurous friends? Envious of the colleagues who can afford to retire early while you're still slogging away? Comparing yourself to others is something that we all do - it's human instinct. "Comparison has been hardwired into our DNA for thousands of years," explains therapist Marisa Peer (marisapeer.com). "Previously, in order to stay alive, we learnt how to do things by watching others. It really was the survival of the fittest."

However, fast forward to the current day and pitting ourselves against our peers has become a measuring stick for material worth, personal success and life satisfaction, often breeding low self-esteem, jealousy and depression as a result. One study* found that we tend to overestimate the happiness and success of others, while failing to notice any negatives about their lives - so it comes as no surprise that people can get stuck feeling 'less than' when comparing themselves to others.

The drive to compare

It's not only the younger generation who are in the grip of 'comparison culture'. There's no doubt that social media exposure plays a huge part, thanks to all those manipulated lifestyles and filtered photos, but seeing how we stack up against others isn't just a modern or digital phenomenon. The idea, coined 'social comparison theory', was first developed by social psychologist Leon Festinger in 1954, and it refers to how we evaluate our abilities and attitudes, in comparison with others.

"We compare our personal attributes to those that are accepted within society and use this comparison to identify where we fit in and how valuable we are to it," says positive psychologist Dawn Baxter (beyondthedawnblog.com). So, whether you're checking out your neighbour's new kitchen extension, or scrolling through a friend's birthday party photos, you may find yourself asking questions about the people in your social space and analysing how their

situations relate to you. You might think, 'How does she keep her home so beautiful while I struggle to stay on top of housework?' or, 'Why does she look much younger than me when she's actually five years older?'

Coming up short

Everyone compares themselves to others to a certain extent, but some of us are more prone to it. "Lack of confidence, insecurity and anxiety can lead to a greater tendency to make comparisons," says Marisa. "Without a baseline of our own self-worth or success, we can perceive everyone around us to be thriving, and feel frustrated and saddened that we aren't measuring up."

Marisa explains that not getting enough support, praise or approval from those close to us as a child, leads to low self-worth as an adult. The result? Desperately seeking validation in later life, through career or personal achievements - and using others as a



ARE YOU STUCK IN THE COMPARISON TRAP?

Tick the statements that you agree with to see if comparing yourself to others is having a negative impact on your mental health.

- ☐ If someone achieves something I'm working towards, I feel like a failure.
- ☐ I use Facebook to check up on old friends to see if they're happier and more successful than me.
- ☐ I put on a 'brave face' to others and rarely share my problems.
- ☐ It can feel like everyone is having a better time than me.
- ☐ I mentally measure my body and attractiveness against other women.
- ☐ It makes me feel sad and jealous when others have what I want.
- ☐ My life is very routine and I don't have exciting experiences.

“IT CAN FEED A CYCLE OF ANXIETY AND SELF-LOATHING”

benchmark for this success. The pull of comparison can feel stronger when you're going through difficult times too. For example, if you've recently lost your job, it might feel like everyone else's careers are soaring. "Try to be strict with yourself about this," says Dawn. "Comparing what you've just lost to what others have is self-inflicted emotional torture."

The dark side of comparison

When used in a positive way, comparison can actually help us become better people. "Throughout our lives, we assess where our peers are on their journey compared to us and this motivates us to make changes, improve our learning or try out new things," says Marisa. However, the damage happens when we also use this assessment to determine how we fall short - for those struggling with low self-esteem, comparison is used in an unhealthy way to fuel feelings of inadequacy.

"We may wonder why we are unable to do the same as those who appear to have it all," says Marisa. "It's common to wear a 'mask' of success when trying to stay on track with everyone else, which can lead to even more pressure - feeding a cycle of anxiety and self-loathing." »

FREE YOURSELF FROM THE CYCLE

Here's how to prevent comparison and feelings of insecurity from sabotaging your wellbeing

1. STAY IN YOUR LANE

Focus on your own goals and work on achieving them in your own time. "Put together a plan, map it out, set realistic timelines, and stay consistent," says Marisa. "Avoid getting distracted by the 'noise' of what others are doing, as this can be demotivating and you'll be less likely to achieve your targets."

2. SPEAK YOUR FEELINGS

After spending the evening with a loved-up couple, would you question whether your own relationship is on the rocks? If you notice negative spiralling thoughts such as these, say them out loud to yourself, suggests Dawn. "What we accept from our internal voice often sounds ridiculous when spoken." This trick will help you to snap out of rumination.

3. GET CURIOUS

Look out for 'emotional landmines'. Having strong emotions when comparing yourself to others is your brain's way of sending you an important message, says Dawn. "When you have that twinge of comparison, bring it to the conscious and challenge it."

Ask yourself, 'What am I feeling?' and 'Where does this stem from?' Almost all reactions of this type come down to fear and lack of self-esteem.

4. PRACTISE AUTHENTICITY

Aim to be true to yourself both in person and online. "This is important, as comparison encourages a competitive 'keeping up with the Joneses' attitude," says Dawn. Be aware of your role in this cycle and try to live your life unapologetically as you are – it will then become easier to recognise when you are pitting yourself against others.

5. UNFOLLOW UNHELPFUL SOCIAL MEDIA

Is scrolling old school friends on Facebook your guilty pleasure? Do you often dig for info about your neighbours to see how they stack up? "Recognise this behaviour for what it is and shut down opportunities to spiral into comparison-led self-pity," says Dawn. "It's very easy to search for self-esteem-sabotaging evidence." Unfollow or mute unhelpful social media accounts, and question your motivation when being nosy about others.

6. BE YOUR OWN CHEERLEADER

Write down a list of your strengths and positive qualities. "This can seem an alien concept as we're hardwired to be humble and celebrating yourself may feel like 'bragging' – but it's not," says Marisa. "It boosts your self-esteem and reminds you why you are a wonderful human being and how you contribute to the world." At times when comparing yourself to others makes you doubt your worth, come back to this list.

7. BE REALISTIC

People often only share positive highlights, which is what you may be comparing yourself to. So, if you're feeling envious or disheartened by the fantastic lives of others, Marisa encourages you to remember that you're likely only seeing a snapshot – not the full picture. Everybody has a 'behind the scenes' version of their life, complete with good and bad days.



WHEN GOSSIP IS *Good*

*It can be surprisingly helpful for
your mental health*

WORDS NATALIA LUBOMIRSKI

Few of us can resist sharing a bit of chit-chat about other people - according to the experts, 60% of adult conversations are about someone who isn't there. But now we can enjoy this guilty pleasure, because science says that there are benefits to having a good blabber behind closed doors.

Social super glue

Gossiping is one of the easiest ways to connect with others, as confiding in someone provides the ultimate binding tool. "It's a great way to demonstrate common values and sense of humour, as well as share worries and seek support," says counsellor Chloe Ward. "And having a mutual dislike creates a stronger bond than sharing similar likes."

It can also help us build personal relationships. "Humans have an innate desire to know about other people's lives," explains Chloe. "People are motivated to engage in gossip in order to bond, to entertain themselves, to vent emotions and to maintain social order within a group." It builds a sense of belonging.

**“IT CAN
HELP US
BUILD PERSONAL
RELATIONSHIPS”**

Stress relief

Feel like a weight has been lifted off your shoulders after a good session? "This is because the frustration that caused you to gossip in the first place has been released," explains Chloe. Having a stressful day? Gossiping with someone and venting your annoyances - even for just five minutes a day - can help to reduce stress levels. Gossiping causes our levels of oxytocin (the love hormone) to increase, while decreasing levels of the stress hormone, cortisol.

Self-improvement

It may seem counterintuitive, but gossiping can sometimes improve your feelings of empathy. "It may allow people to understand a difficult personal situation that another is facing," explains Chloe. And hearing positive stories about others provides motivation for self-improvement. ■

HOW TO KEEP IT POSITIVE

To stop your gossip getting out of control, follow these tittle-tattle tips:

BE A SOUNDING BOARD

Provide a confidential outlet for your friend or colleague to vent. It will stop things festering and potentially allow them to come to terms with the problem.

ASK FOR FEEDBACK

When discussing a person or relationship, ask your fellow gossip to listen with the goal of providing opinions, ideas and techniques to help you approach the situation in a different way.

STAY POSITIVE

If your chatter often spirals into backstabbing and bitchiness, make a point of saying nice things behind people's backs instead, and note how it makes you feel.



LIVING IN THE Shadows

Here we look at the psychological impact of competing with your other half's ex-partner and ways you can step out of the shadows and into your light

WORDS LEAH LARWOOD

Have you ever had a relationship - or maybe you're in one currently - where your partner still adores his or her ex? Perhaps the signs are indirect. The occasional memory recalled with such fondness; photographs or poignant gifts still a focal point in their home; or possibly it's more

subtle than that - a seemingly innocent comparison dropped into conversation now and then. So what might be some of the drivers underlying this kind of scenario?

Arguably there could be a few different configurations that lead to an instance such as this. One possibility is that your partner hasn't fully grieved or let go of their ex and is still holding onto some unfinished business.



ALEXIS FRIEDLANDER

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THE FLIP SIDE

Thinking fondly about an ex isn't always problematic. A recent study (2023) by the University of Kansas, US, asked volunteers to think about nostalgic memories with an ex-partner. Participants who were able to do this showed an increase in satisfaction in their current relationship, and more motivation to stick with their relationship. How so? Apparently the volunteers felt that thinking of their ex fondly showed them how much they'd grown since their former relationship. Individuals who reported an increase in relationship satisfaction also stated that they'd grown since their past relationship. Researchers believe this is because this feeling increased their appreciation of their current partner.

Alternatively, perhaps the situation is congruent and there might be some of your own process and history playing out in how you experience these encounters. Arguably, the most likely possibility is that the situation is co-created in some way - a combination of your partner's unfinished business and some of your own anxieties or past experiences creating this uncomfortable situation.

The psychological effect

Regardless, the impact of 'living in the shadows' can feel very unsettling, leading to feelings of insecurity and feeling like an outsider. Ultimately, it can create a divide and prevent rich contact between two people. Alexis Friedlander is a relationship counsellor and hypnotherapist specialising in coaching people through traumatic break-ups. He explains, "Competing with an ex-partner can have a significant impact »

“THE IMPACT OF ‘LIVING IN THE SHADOWS’ CAN FEEL VERY UNSETTLING, LEADING TO FEELINGS OF INSECURITY AND FEELING LIKE AN OUTSIDER”



5 TIPS ON HOW TO COMMUNICATE YOUR FEELINGS TO YOUR PARTNER

Alexis Friedlander's advice on understanding your emotions...

1. ASSESS

Ask yourself whether you are actually living in the shadows of your partner's ex or whether this is just a fear you have. Does your partner or their family make you feel like you are living in the shadow of the ex? If not, then it's important to work on addressing your own internal fears and insecurities.

2. COMMUNICATE

Speak to your partner about how you feel. Be honest about how you feel, but also be clear about what you need from your partner in order to feel more secure in the relationship.

3. SET BOUNDARIES

Be clear with your partner's ex, if they are still a significant part of your partner's life. This could mean asking your partner to limit their interactions with their ex or making it clear that you are not comfortable with certain types of interactions.

4. PRACTISE ACCEPTANCE

Accept that your partner's ex is still a part of their life; it's important to accept that and learn to be okay with it. This doesn't mean you have to be best friends with the ex, but it does mean being willing to interact with them in a respectful and cordial way when necessary.

5. BUILD SELF-WORTH

Focus on building your own self-confidence and sense of self-worth. Remember that your worth is not determined by your relationship status or how you compare to your partner's ex, but by your own unique qualities and strengths.

on an individual's psychological wellbeing, as it can trigger a range of negative emotions and experiences. When a person feels like they are in competition with their partner's ex, they may experience feelings of inadequacy, insecurity and low self-esteem."

Attachment styles in relationships

Alexis also believes the impact on the individual may depend on whether the person has an anxious or an avoidant attachment style. In psychological terms, attachment is how we 'attach' and relate

to others we have a relationship with. Attachment theory identifies four core types of attachment styles: secure, anxious-ambivalent, disorganised and avoidant.

Alexis said, "Anxious individuals may feel intense insecurity and self-doubt when they perceive their partner to still be attached to their ex. They may constantly seek reassurance and validation from their partner, and may try to please their partner in hopes of competing with the ex. This can lead to a cycle of neediness and clinginess, which may further push their partner away."

However, 'avoidant' individuals may react by pulling away or avoiding the situation altogether. They may become distant, aloof or even dismissive when confronted with their partner's attachment to their ex, which can lead to feelings of neglect and abandonment in their current partner. Alexis adds, "In both cases, living in the shadow of an ex can trigger deep-seated attachment fears and insecurities, which can have a negative impact on the current relationship."

"When we become the 'rebound' in a new relationship, we may start to feel like we are living in a recycled version of the previous relationship. This can happen because the person who is rebounding may be unconsciously trying to recreate the same dynamic with us as they had with their ex. It can be challenging to navigate this situation and to ensure that we are not being treated as a replacement or a stand-in for their previous partner. It's something I see a lot in rebound relationships - people go to the same places, keep the same rituals. Remember, your partner chose you for a reason, and their ex is a part of their past, not their present or future."

So where can you begin to unpick a potentially complex situation involving an ex? As a starting point, there are two things to consider in a situation like this - 'awareness' and 'communication'. This means having some awareness of your emotional responses and what history you might be bringing to the situation, while also observing the process of your partner and other parties involved, too. It's then a case of being clear in expressing your feelings and communicating your needs to ensure that you and your partner can have an open and honest dialogue to find a way forward.



Q&A

DR AUDREY TANG

Dr Audrey Tang is a BPS chartered psychologist, award-winning business author, and leadership development trainer.

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Here we ask Dr Audrey Tang her views about what it might mean to feel as though you are 'living in the shadows' of an ex.

How can you overcome 'living in the shadows' of an ex?

A state of comparison to fuel our self-esteem and to feel validation has been programmed into us through being part of a community, sometimes because resources are scarce

“REMEMBER, YOUR PARTNER CHOSE YOU FOR A REASON”

- so the 'best' wins. When it comes to love and validation, if we are able to give it to ourselves, the source is infinite - there's no scarcity. Therefore, there's no need to feel you are losing out. Further, in building our character, a focus on self-compassion is important - for example, saying 'I didn't win, but I'm proud I actually showed up as I could easily have sacked it off' - building ourselves up with our only 'competition' being that we are perhaps that little bit better today than we were yesterday.

What happens if your partner's parents still adore the ex?

Each partner is likely to have formed a different type of relationship with the in-laws, and in the same way as all our friendships are different depending on the people involved - it might be that simply our partner's parents got on better with their ex. The main thing is, our partner did not. This question is more about how your partner makes you feel rather than the family.

It is unfortunate, it isn't pleasant, and it might even be deliberately mean if the family is constantly bringing up comparisons which do not favour you. In the first instance, the act of comparison speaks to someone's own values. The healthiest approach to self-value is self-compassion not self-esteem (through comparison), but you are nonetheless also not dating the family. If, however, your partner is keen to support them, or their behaviours turn into little personal passive-aggressive digs at you, then you may need to consider whether that person themselves is worth your time and energy.

What happens when you're competing with the memory of a deceased partner?

What may be happening - and it may only be time and processing that will make the difference - is that the partner may not have processed their grief, or be in a state of 'what if', which still speaks to not having processed what they have been through. Either way, this would suggest that they are not ready to be in a new relationship yet. As difficult as this may be to hear, you may need to decide whether you want to be with someone who isn't giving, and may never give you their breadth of love, or if you need to give yourself the opportunity to be wholly happy.

What advice do you have on managing our feelings in complicated emotional situations?

Work out what it is you are feeling. If you are feeling fear, for example, ask yourself where the fear is coming from - perhaps it is jealousy or a lack of self-value. Already you will see that both would necessitate different solutions. The 'Feelings Wheel' by Dr Gloria Willcox is a lovely tool to begin to explore beyond the emotional top line.

If you are feeling envious then try this: instead, write up a list of the things you feel envious of, and note down the things that you observe as making that person so accomplished, and if you want to develop them either:

- Try to practise those behaviours and see which ones work for you
- Ask them how they developed those traits. Often when we approach someone with love and curiosity (rather than dismissal or disdain) they actually want to help us and if they don't, then maybe you didn't want to be so like them after all! ■



TRY ROSALIND WISEMAN'S SEAL TECHNIQUE

A helpful tool for dealing with conflict

S - STOP Take a step back from the emotion of the situation.

E - EXPLAIN Why you feel as you do and why did what happened take place? What you would have preferred to happen?

A - AFFIRM / ACKNOWLEDGE Validate the right to feel those emotions, and also acknowledge how all the parties involved may be feeling. What role can you play in making the situation better?

L - LOCK IN / OUT This can be decided after the first three steps. How do you want the relationship or situation to progress? If it's 'locking in' then you need to find a way to resolve it. Alternatively, 'locking out' can allow you to find a way to move on and without regret or holding a grudge.

LOCKING OUT If you have tried to solve the issues and it simply isn't happening or you find that the situation is too toxic, then perhaps try the following first, but if not, then it is time to 'lock out' the relationship. For example, you may need to state a consequence (also one negotiated with your partner), such as, 'If you continue to compare me to X I won't come round here anymore', and be willing to follow through. With this you might be able to open a negotiation and ask, 'So, how can we resolve this?'

COULD YOUR BRAIN EASE *Chronic Pain?*

Experts suggest looking at things from another angle might help treat this debilitating condition

WORDS DEBRA WATERS

If you're one of the 43% of the UK population* who deals with moderate-to-severe chronic pain, you may have felt frustrated by a lack of options and understanding. Sufferers of painful ailments, such as arthritis, back pain, fibromyalgia, migraines and gynaecological issues face many obstacles. Pain can affect the ability to work, earn, be an active parent or grandparent, partner or friend, and lead a fulfilling life. Treatment involves painkillers, physiotherapy or operations, which may alleviate pain but usually don't treat the cause.

A different approach

With no cure in sight, medical professionals are looking to the brain, rather than the

body, for answers. "We assume pain is an accurate measure of injury but in most cases of long-term [also called chronic or persistent] pain, the initial injury has usually healed, and pain has become 'wired' into the brain," says Dr Monty Lyman, author of *The Painful Truth* (£9.99/\$12, Penguin). "This is because pain isn't a measure of tissue injury; it's a protective mechanism - our brain's unconscious opinion of whether our body is in danger or not. And chronic pain is often a case of our brain being overprotective."

If long-term pain is effectively coming from the brain, treatment needs to reflect that. The benefits of holistic care are encouraging - Dr Lyman's IBS, for example, was helped by hypnotherapy.

"Everyone's pain is real and unique, but there's a simple formula to help reduce persistent pain," he says. "Anything that provides evidence of safety to the brain - eg movement, socialising, talking therapies, breathing exercises or pain education - is likely to reduce it."

Brain power

Other health professionals also believe the brain plays a part. For instance, the Curable app (App Store/Google Play, curablehealth.com) offers strategies. "Curable doesn't settle for merely managing pain; its goal is to relieve pain," says Dr David Clarke, MD, who's on its Scientific Advisory Team. "This is achieved by taking advantage of cutting-edge research about how the brain can become highly sensitised by certain forms of stress such as current life issues, the prolonged impact of childhood adversity, past traumas, unrecognised emotions, anxiety and depression."

Dr Lyman agrees. "Anything that provides evidence of threat to the brain - stress, anxiety, social isolation or a belief that your body is weak or broken - is fuel for pain's fire," he explains.

Next time you're suffering, says Dr Lyman, remember pain is a protector, not a detector of injury. Change your mindset. "Otherwise we continue to rely on painkillers, which for most are inadequate at relieving long-term pain. We need national pain education programmes - only then can we help people rewire their brains out of pain." ■

FIGHT FOR YOUR RIGHTS

Not all pain is treated equally. Women are more likely to be affected by chronic pain than men - regardless of age or pain type - and also taken less seriously. "Women have, sadly, faced a bias in pain research and treatment," says Dr Lyman. For example, there are roughly five times as many studies on erectile dysfunction than premenstrual syndrome, he explains, despite PMS being much more common.

His advice? Arm yourself with as much information as you can.

"Knowledge is power, so learn about modern pain science. You might end up educating your medical professional as well!"

Try looking at The Flippin' Pain website - flippinpain.co.uk

“TREATMENTS USUALLY
DON'T TREAT THE CAUSE”



‘MY PAIN WASN’T TAKEN SERIOUSLY’

Laura, 32, Brighton

“I’ve experienced chronic pain since I was a teenager. My periods have always been incredibly painful and I got an ovarian cyst filled with endometriosis. It caused me constant pain and would impact being able to exercise, walk and drive. I got very depressed and when I was at work I couldn’t drive because the pain spread down my legs. It was challenging. Luckily, my boss was really good. My pain wasn’t taken seriously.

The general attitude is that periods hurt. There’s no real conversation as to why. It took until I was 31 to be diagnosed. My endometriosis is bad – I’ll have difficulty conceiving and need further operations. I feel I was greeted by people not wanting to explore my problems. If I was a man, I’m certain they’d have brought me in sooner. I had to say I was suicidal with the pain to get them to operate. In my opinion, the male doctors had no room for holistic care. I’m now seeing an endometriosis team who have been much more supportive.

My advice is to complain. Constantly, as much as you can. Make a fuss and trust your body. Medical professionals often think they know more about your body than you but you live in it and can feel when something isn’t right. I also did something called Emotional Freedom Technique [EMT], which is tapping. And my counsellor taught me to meditate and relax. When I tense and respond to pain, it gets worse so lying down, closing my eyes and tensing and releasing my body to teach it how to relax helps.”

DOES EQ MATTER MORE THAN IQ?

Your emotional intelligence can be an important contributor towards success in life, but what is it and how can we develop these essential skills?

WORDS JULIE BASSETT

We so often think of intelligence in terms of being 'smart', doing well at school academically or acing an IQ test. But what if the most important form of intelligence isn't our ability to acquire and apply knowledge, but in the way that we are aware of, and in control of, our emotions?

Emotional intelligence (EI) isn't something we're actively taught at school, and yet it can greatly impact our journey through life and our interpersonal relationships. In a 2018 article*, 'A New Layered Model On Emotional Intelligence', it states that emotional intelligence 'focuses on the character and aspects of self-control, such as the ability to delay pleasures, the tolerance to frustrations, and the regulation of impulses'.

It's an area of increasing interest to researchers, with numerous studies looking to unlock the secrets of our emotional

intelligence and its importance to our wellbeing. It's not, by any means, a new concept. Aristotle wrote about the ability to master our emotional capacity almost 2,000 years ago: "Anyone can become angry - that is easy. But to be angry with the right person, to the right degree, at the right time, for the right purpose, and in the right way - this is not easy."

Some experts in this area would argue that emotional intelligence, or our Emotional Quotient (EQ), is more important than IQ (Intelligence Quotient) when it comes to success in life. One of the best-known writers on the subject is Daniel Goleman, whose 1995 book *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Matters More Than IQ* is often considered one of the most comprehensive insights into emotional intelligence. "We have gone too far in emphasising the value and import of the purely rational - of what IQ measures - in human life," he writes. "For

better or worse, intelligence can come to nothing when the emotions hold sway."

So, emotional intelligence matters a great deal. Being able to control your emotions and express them, as well as understand the emotions of others and respond to them, can work to your advantage in personal, social and work environments. But don't worry if you don't possess all of these skills; emotional intelligence can be improved and developed.

Signs and benefits of being emotionally intelligent

How do you know how emotionally intelligent you are, or not? There are various tests available online, though many of these free tests are to be taken lightly. Psychologists have more in-depth testing processes that can determine a person's emotional intelligence. It's also not uncommon these days for hiring managers to use some form of emotional intelligence testing to consider candidates for a role, identifying those who will contribute meaningfully to the team environment and cope well under pressure.

There are some identifiable signs of emotional intelligence. Daniel Goleman's theory suggests that there are five components of emotional intelligence: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation,

“IT MIGHT MEAN YOU'RE BETTER EQUIPPED TO HANDLE DIFFICULT OR STRESSFUL SITUATIONS”

empathy and social skills. You might notice elements of these within yourself. Some of the signs can include:

A good level of self-awareness, including knowing your strengths and weaknesses

Being able to own up to and accept responsibility for your mistakes

Not dwelling on past mistakes and letting things go

Being able to explain and describe what others around you are feeling

A high level of empathy for others

Being able to control and manage your emotions, even in difficult situations

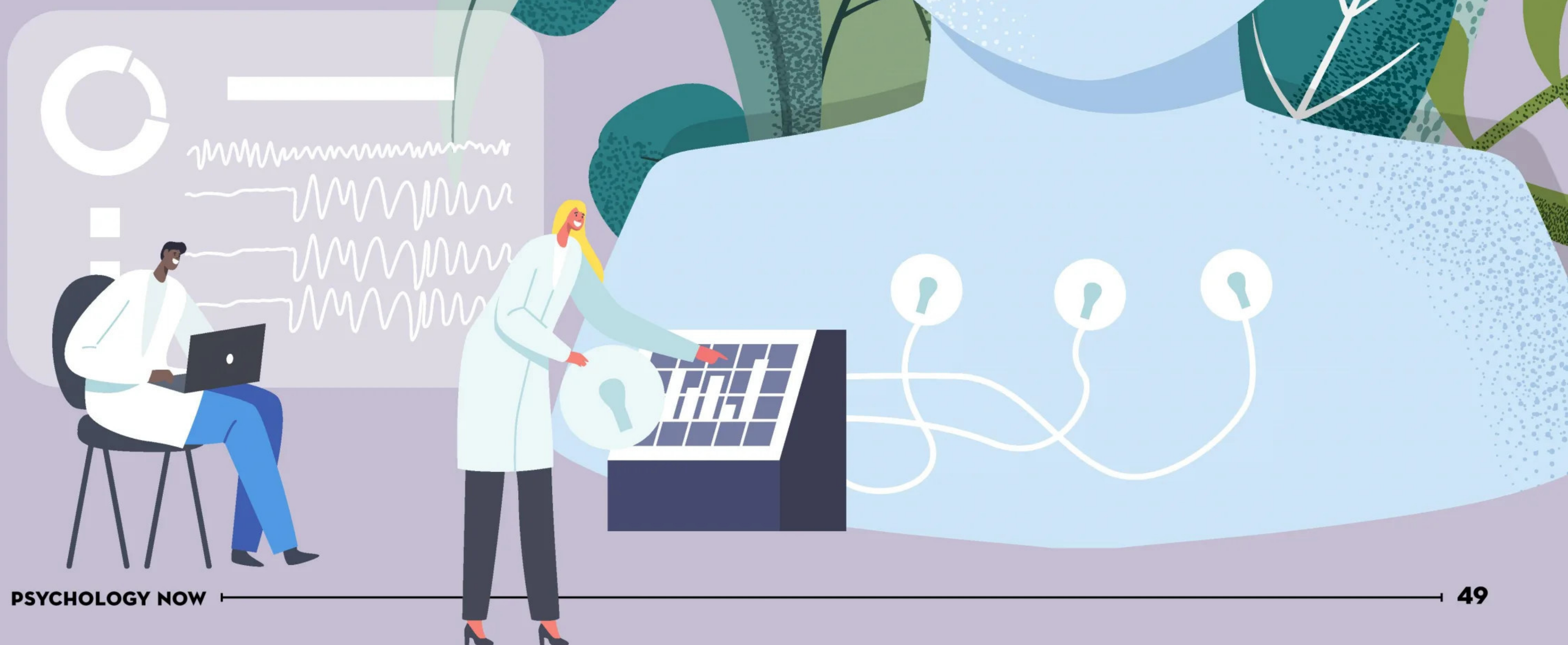
Confidence in yourself and acceptance of who you are

Curiosity about other people and the world around you

The ability to accept change in your life

You may identify with some, none or all of these, which can give an indication of your level of emotional intelligence. Looking at Goleman's five components (see the box on page 51), you might feel that you are strong in some areas, and less so in others, which in itself takes a degree of self-awareness to be able to understand this about yourself.

There are benefits to having a high EQ. For example, it might mean that you're better equipped to handle difficult or stressful situations. You may be »





5 WAYS TO IMPROVE YOUR EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

1. LEARN YOUR EMOTIONS

Take the time to acknowledge your emotions and appraise how you're feeling. What emotion are you experiencing and how is it making you react? What triggered the emotion?

2. ADAPT YOUR RESPONSE

Take a pause when you feel an emotion arise and consider it. For example, if something has made you angry and you want to shout, take a breath and think, 'How could I respond to this another way?'

3. REQUEST FEEDBACK

Talk to others around you about how they perceive you and how you react to situations. It might be quite revealing, and you may get answers that are different to what you expected.

4. CONSUME VARIED CONTENT

To develop empathy, try to make an effort to consume media that's outside your lived experience, whether that's by following different voices on social media, reading a wide range of books or watching documentaries.

5. LEARN TO LISTEN

When you're having a conversation with someone, really listen. Don't let your mind wander, but look at their body language and the words they are using. This will help you to pick up on different cues and understand how they are feeling.

more able to remain calm yourself, and help others in the same situation. It might also mean that you're less likely to turn to external and unhealthy coping mechanisms, instead being able to manage the emotions you are experiencing.

Those with a high EQ are also good with other people. That can mean dealing with people who are upset or angry in a tactful and respectful way. At work, this can mean that you're able to assess how the people you're working with are feeling and help steer conversations in the right direction. It also means you're able to listen to and take on board other people's points of view. You might also be better at negotiations and influencing the outcome of presentations by being able to adapt your behaviour to suit the people you are speaking to.

As you're more likely to be able to own up to mistakes and take responsibility for them, you may be considered honest and trustworthy. You're also more likely to be a good listener and confidant, which can enhance your personal relationships. It can also mean that you're more positive and able to find the good, even in bad situations. This can improve your mental health and wellbeing. You are also more likely to be highly motivated, meaning that you can achieve success in different areas of your life, and not give up when things are hard.

The other side of emotional intelligence

This all sounds very positive, and highlights the importance of a high EQ. However, there are drawbacks to having a very high level of emotional intelligence, too.

For example, according to the article 'The Downsides of Being Very Emotionally Intelligent'**, one of the problems is that those with a high EQ might lack creativity and innovative thinking. The reasoning is that it can be hard to challenge a status quo or convention that keeps people happy, rather than trying something new that may cause a little disruption. Also, while people with a high EQ are great at building team relations, they're less likely to be able to deliver negative feedback or to upset people by disagreeing with them, as they are so aware of how this might make people feel and sensitive to that. Those with high EQ might also be risk adverse, which can limit innovation.

Another downside is that by being so empathetic, a person who is quite emotionally intelligent can end up taking on a lot of worry and stress on behalf of other people. They may also spend a lot of time trying to help those around them and be at risk of burning out. So, while our EQ is incredibly important, we need to also use some of that self-awareness to know when to step back from situations and allow for some self-care. There is also a lot to be said for allowing spontaneity and risk to play a part in all our lives.

At the other end of the spectrum, there are those who have a low level of emotional intelligence, which can bring about a different set of problems. Those with a low EQ might find that they are often misunderstood or find it hard to assert themselves in conversations. They may struggle to read other people's feelings and emotions, or be unsure of how to react when someone is angry or upset. They might even behave in a way that comes across as insensitive, uncaring or unsympathetic – not intentionally, but because of this difficulty in understanding the emotions of others and not knowing how to express their own emotions.

Another issue is that a lack of emotional awareness can lead to becoming overwhelmed by emotion and getting upset, or lashing out, easily; or it might mean that we don't express emotions at all and repress a lot of our feelings rather than deal with them. Those with a lower EQ might blame others for mistakes rather than take ownership of them, and have poorer coping skills, including walking away from situations instead of confronting them.

How to improve your EQ

It's important to note that a low EQ, and difficulty in controlling emotion, can sometimes be a symptom of a mental health problem, such as depression or anxiety. If you feel like your ability to control and identify your emotions has changed, and you have other symptoms of a mental health issue, it's important to talk to a medical professional.

Other things can impact on our EQ as well, such as the way that we were treated in childhood by caregivers. Not all children are encouraged to name and express the emotions that they are feeling, so they don't develop the skills needed to be emotionally intelligent as adults. Some of us are also more naturally emotionally intelligent than others.

Whatever level you feel your EQ is at this moment in time, there are things that you can do to improve it. Some studies show that your emotional intelligence is a skill that can be built and developed*** with practice. It involves spending some time with yourself, and thinking about your emotions and the way you react in different situations. Also, spend time considering comments that others might have said about you or to you. Has it been mentioned that you don't always pick up on when someone is upset, for example, or that you don't listen? Acknowledging these comments can help you to highlight the areas to start improving. A journal can be a useful tool to help you notice areas for improvement in this period of self-reflection.

You can also improve your emotional intelligence by spending time with others. Make an effort to really listen to what people are saying, and ask questions that show

you are paying attention. Watch people's body language and see what you can learn from this about the way they are feeling. Try to empathise with others' situations, even if their lives and experiences are far removed from your own life. See the box

on page 50 for some more tips and ideas to improve your emotional intelligence.

With practice and patience, you can build and improve your emotional intelligence and reap the benefits of success, happiness and self-awareness. ■

“THOSE WITH A LOWER EQ MIGHT BLAME OTHERS FOR MISTAKES RATHER THAN TAKE OWNERSHIP OF THEM”

COMPONENTS OF EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

There are five elements to emotional intelligence, according to psychologist Daniel Goleman. These are a mix of personal and interpersonal skills that together determine how good we are at expressing, controlling and identifying emotions.

SELF-AWARENESS

This is about understanding your emotions and feelings, and why you are feeling a particular way. It's also about knowing your strengths and weaknesses.

SELF-REGULATION

This is the control element, being able to manage your emotions effectively and to admit to any mistakes you might make.

MOTIVATION

This element refers to your ability to drive yourself to meet your goals in different areas of life, setting a standard for yourself and working towards it. When things don't go to plan, it's about finding a positive outcome, learning resilience and reframing your goals.

EMPATHY

This is about being able to identify how other people might be feeling and responding to that. This means being able to put yourself into someone else's shoes and communicate with them effectively.

SOCIAL SKILLS

This refers to the way in which you interact with other people, both at work and in social settings. It's about being able to work in a team, communicate effectively, listen to others and speak confidently.

HOW TO STRESS Better

*You can't escape it
entirely, but stress isn't
all bad, and there are
ways to harness it to
your advantage*



WORDS JENNY ROWE

KNOW YOUR STRESSORS

To stress better (and less), we need to know our triggers. Stress trackers monitor things like heart rate variability (the variation in time between each heart beat) to measure stress levels and help us identify our personal triggers – so we can come up with solutions. The key to successful stress tracking is to ensure you're asking, 'Why am I stressed?', not the less useful question, 'How stressed am I?', says Dr Burnett.

TRY IT Most fitness wearables now have stress tracking capabilities, or you can try the StressScan app for free (Apple, Google Play). At its simplest, stress tracking could just mean keeping a stress diary. "Rate the stress from 1-10 as it happens," says Caron. "This will help you feel in control of the stress rather than the stress controlling you."

As the cost of living crisis spirals, our stress levels are following suit. One in five people in the UK say they feel stressed more than they don't, and money worries are one of the primary causes*. But we shouldn't be scared of stress. "It's normal," says psychotherapist Caron Barrow, co-founder of The Niche Group. "It's how we manage it that makes the difference."

We can learn to turn stress into something more useful – helpful even, adds neuroscientist and author of *Psychological*, Dr Dean Burnett. Sound good? Here's how to harness and not hate all stress.

A helping hand

"Stress is the brain's threat detection system preparing us to deal with danger," says Dr Burnett. It mostly feels unpleasant, but on a fundamental level it keeps us safe. "While it is usually the consequence of a negative situation, there may be positive outcomes," says Caron. This is more likely if we are working towards a goal that we believe is positive too, such as interviewing for a new job, getting married or running a race.

Ultimately, an optimal dose of stress can help us perform better. "The stress response increases muscle tension and raises heart and breathing rate, which makes you more focused, less distractible and more motivated," says Dr Burnett. Whatever you're feeling stressed about, this physiological reaction means you

are more likely to complete the task to the best of your ability. This is stress in its positive form, which is known as eustress.

Striking a balance

"Countless studies have shown that, up to a point, a person's performance increases directly in proportion to how much stress they're experiencing," says Dr Burnett. However, if stress levels continue past this point, we start to struggle. "This increases our stress levels again and we can get stuck in a stress cycle," says Caron.

The main issue with stress is when you have too much of it for too long – this is when acute stress morphs into chronic, more harmful stress. "When stress is constant, it's like keeping your foot on the accelerator," says Caron. "It leads to burnout."

Breaking point

Stress is sneaky. It can be easy to keep cruising through life, not realising you're approaching burnout – until you're there. "Our brains aren't particularly good at noticing changes that happen over long periods," says Dr Burnett. "But it can be done, particularly if the changes caused by stress are marked."

You may be struggling to sleep, have low or high appetite, headaches, low sexual desire or high blood pressure. If you are unable to finish tasks, feel tearful, worry all the time or snap at people when you normally wouldn't, then stress may be affecting your wellbeing and it's time to get help.

It's important to recognise that there is a difference between coping with stress and dealing with it. "Dealing with stress involves processing stressful emotions and actively bringing about changes that address the cause of stress," says Dr Burnett. "Coping is just putting up with the stressful situation and carrying on, which is not a great long-term strategy, as our capacity for tolerating stress will max out eventually."

How to stress better

So can we become better at dealing with stress and stop it tipping us over the edge? In short, yes. Like musicians, dancers and actors who are taught to reinterpret their nerves as excitement, it's possible to change our emotional reactions to stressful experiences into something more positive – though obviously this depends on the situation, and mainly applies to small-scale day-to-day dramas.

Optimists who choose to see potential daily stressors (such as traffic jams and chores) as challenges rather than threats before emotions flare up, reduce the negative impact of stress, as shown in a recent two-decade-long study**.

You can also try to increase your threshold for stress. "By taking on new challenges and pushing yourself beyond your comfort zone – but in ways that you feel OK with – you could gradually increase the amount of stress you're capable of dealing with," says Dr Burnett. ■

“WE CAN LEARN TO TURN STRESS INTO SOMETHING MORE USEFUL”

THE OLD WOUNDS OF Youth

‘Inner child wounds’ is a term often used in popular psychology, but what exactly are they and how do they affect us as adults?

WORDS EMMA GREEN

It is easy to forget that we once possessed the mind of a child. But as much as we would like to believe that we have outgrown our childish concerns and fears, that could not be further from the truth. Our personalities are made up of multiple selves, and the ‘inner child’ buried deep within us plays an essential role in that identity. It is a part of the subconscious that we learnt to repress and ignore as we matured into adulthood.

But who or what is our ‘inner child’? To put it simply, our inner child represents the different versions of ourselves throughout our formative and adolescent years, and is the part of us that still acts and behaves like a child. It not only retains the memories, lessons and emotions we had as a kid, but also the very best of the childish qualities within us: innocence, creativity, curiosity, imagination and hope. However, it can just as equally preserve the negative traits associated with immaturity, such as sulkiness, helplessness and mischief.

The concept of the inner child is often affiliated with the psychologist Carl Jung, who proposed the idea of a child archetype to describe the childlike aspects of our personality. Jung believed that this subpersonality, along with our childhood experiences, influences our behaviour as adults. Author and self-help guru John Bradshaw is also credited with bringing the term to the attention of a wider audience, specifically regarding how the wounded inner child can be a representation of the unresolved and lingering effects of a dysfunctional childhood.

Early childhood experiences

Those who were blessed to grow up in a nurturing and attentive household, where their boundaries were respected and they were accepted and loved for who they were, tend to develop a healthy and well-balanced inner child. This can be seen in their ability to assert themselves as well as to advocate for their needs and wants.

Sadly, for some people this does not match up to their own experiences of childhood.

As young children, we are impressionable to the environment around us, and so can easily absorb any negative messages, words or treatment that comes from that. Inner child wounds, also known as attachment wounds, can then develop as a result of exposure to trauma or neglect. If these wounds are not repaired, they can have damaging and long-lasting effects into adulthood – ready to rupture when we’re feeling stressed, angry or under pressure.

Incidents that can have a detrimental impact on a child’s mental and physical wellbeing are often referred to as Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). The children’s mental health charity, Young Minds, refers to ACEs as any ‘highly stressful, and potentially traumatic, events or situations that occur during childhood and/or adolescence. They can be a single event, or prolonged threats to, and breaches of, the young person’s safety, security, trust or bodily integrity’. This

“AS CHILDREN, WE CAN EASILY ABSORB ANY NEGATIVE MESSAGE”

can include being subjected to physical, emotional or sexual abuse as a child; living with a caregiver with substance abuse issues or a mental illness; exposure to domestic violence; or losing a parent through death, divorce or abandonment. According to a 2014 study, 47% of people in the UK have experienced at least one ACE, while 9% of the population have endured four or more ACES.

Other types of trauma that can have a profound effect on a child's welfare includes being bullied by their peers; suffering from financial poverty or unstable living conditions; witnessing a harrowing event; or experiencing a significant life upheaval.

Different types of abuse and neglect

If we were to categorise the main classes of maltreatment that can cause inner child wounds, they would fall under three brackets: physical, psychological and emotional.

Children are reliant on their caregivers to provide nourishment, shelter and protection. When those needs are not met, this can have »



CONNECTING TO OUR INNER CHILD

To begin the healing process, we must engage in reflection, and start addressing our unmet needs. Here are some suggestions for how we can start that journey:

- *Working with a therapist can help to uncover negative behavioural patterns and validate painful emotions originating from childhood. Inner child work can be found in many forms of therapy, including trauma therapy, EMDR therapy and art therapy.*
- Plotting the timeline of our formative years can help to identify the experiences that are particular pain points for us and where we still have work to do.
- *Writing a letter to our inner child (or from our inner child) can create a safe space for us to express and honour the feelings of our younger selves.*
- Learning to re-parent ourselves gives us that which we lacked in childhood. This may involve self-care, making time for activities that nourish us, and showing ourselves compassion.

a huge impact on a child's sense of safety and security. Physical abuse can range from insufficient access to food and warmth, to being a victim of violence. This can result in the affected person developing maladaptive coping methods such as addictions to food, drugs and alcohol, or engaging in intense safety-seeking behaviours, for instance OCD.

Psychological abuse refers to any negative treatment in the form of name-calling, ridicule, gaslighting, yelling, threatening, or

consistently violating a child's boundaries, such as refusing them any privacy. It can also include living in a home where overly high expectations are set, and it is the norm to be regularly punished or mocked for not meeting those standards. Growing up in this kind of environment can foster deep-seated feelings of anger, which can later manifest into problems maintaining healthy relationships, or a psychological or physical illness.

Emotional abuse refers to a lack of interest shown by parents in their child's emotional needs. A failure to show regular love, affection or support can be particularly harmful to a child's self-esteem. Other forms of emotional neglect can include a child not being allowed to safely express their emotions or needs without fear of repercussions. These children then grow up into damaged adults, learning that they must ignore or repress their feelings, or seek validation from others to boost their self-worth.

It is not only major traumatic events that can cause inner child wounds to evolve, though. Any situation where a child may have been made to feel unsafe, rejected or ashamed can lead to issues later on in life. Seemingly insignificant occurrences, such as a throwaway comment made by a family member, being excluded by their peers, or unfavourable comparisons to siblings can leave an irreparable hole in a person's psyche.

Although it is normal to feel bitter towards the adults who let us down in our youth, it is important to remember that, in most cases, they could only do the best with the level of emotional maturity and information they had at the time. It is easy to forget that they are products of their environment and most likely acted the way they did due to their own unresolved inner child wounds. Searching for answers or an apology from our former caregivers can be futile if they do not have the capacity to accept or admit to any wrongdoing on their behalf. Therefore, it is our responsibility, as adults now, to soothe and care for our own inner child.

Signs of inner child trauma

The first step to healing our inner child is not only to discover what kind of wound we might have but to understand how these injuries show up in our behaviour. The most common types of inner child wounds relate to abandonment, guilt, neglect and trust, and each wound stems from a particular pain point from our past.

An abandonment wound can occur from experiences of being ostracised or rejected as a child. It can also arise from perceived abandonment by emotionally distant parents, or from a loved one dying or leaving the home. As adults, those suffering from this type of wound may fear being left alone and subsequently develop needy or



clingy behaviour. They may also be drawn to co-dependent relationships or to those who are emotionally unavailable in a subconscious attempt to overcome the hurt from their past. Alternatively, others with this wound may instead choose to become hyper-independent or deliberately sabotage relationships to avoid further abandonment or rejection.

Guilt wounds can develop from growing up in a setting where a child was either made to feel repeatedly remorseful over insignificant matters, or was held to extreme standards of what was deemed to be 'good' and 'bad'. They carry around with them a sense of always feeling 'in the wrong', as well as a desire to try to make up for their 'badness', even when they are not at fault. This can be displayed in behaviours such as over apologising, putting others' needs before their own, and struggling to set healthy boundaries, saying no to others, or asking for help. Sometimes, people with this wound can also resort to guilt-tripping themselves in a bid to manipulate others.

Children who often felt ignored or uncared for in their younger years can acquire what is known as a neglect wound. Hurt from not being seen or heard or made to feel important can bottle up over time and express itself in sudden anger outbursts, attention-seeking behaviour or an inability to let things go. A neglect wound may also be reflected in a lack of self-worth or being drawn to relationships or situations where they continue to be underappreciated.

Trust wounds emerge when caregivers either cause harm to a child, fail to protect them from danger or are unable to fulfil their promises. This lack of security can result in difficulty trusting others, avoiding situations where they could get hurt, or relying heavily on external validation and approval. It can also lead to a compulsive urge to always have to be in control to overcompensate for feelings of vulnerability and insecurity. Yet despite this, people with these particular wounds still tend to attract those who either don't make them feel safe or who fail to keep their promises, further continuing the cycle of betrayal and distrust.

It is possible to have several inner child wounds or for a wound to express itself in different ways, such as being a people-pleaser; suffering from 'overachiever syndrome'; chasing perfectionism; avoiding conflict; normalising abusive behaviour; or using aggression as a solution to problems.

Acknowledging our inner child

Everyone can act like a child, especially when hurt, angry or disappointed - but if we are repeatedly regressing to unhealthy patterns that enabled us to survive as children, then we must start treating the festering sores that are infecting our behaviour.

By making the decision to embark on inner child work, we begin to not only establish the sense of safety and security that our younger selves so sorely lacked, but we also start to provide the very things that we needed at the time - love, attention, respect and so forth. So many of the destructive behaviours and problems that we encounter as adults come from making decisions and viewing life through the lens of an injured child. Healing our inner child, therefore, is one of the most profound forms of inner work that we can do, not only for improving our relationship with ourselves and others, but because it also puts a stop to the transference of intergenerational trauma.

When we start to acknowledge and show kindness to our inner child, we can unlock the many unexpected gifts that this part of our personality has to offer, such as our limitless capacity for love and boundless enthusiasm. When we choose to repress or ignore our inner child, however, we remain bored, empty and disconnected from life. ■



“HEALING OUR INNER CHILD IS ONE OF THE MOST PROFOUND FORMS OF INNER WORK WE CAN DO”

HEALING INNER CHILD WOUNDS

Here are a few ways that we can begin to treat specific inner child wounds:

- Healing an abandonment wound requires establishing a sense of safety for ourselves. Try some safe-place visualisations or EFT tapping to release past abandonment hurt.
- *To heal a guilt wound, there needs to be a release from any remorse that the inner child is still holding on to, along with their belief that they must rescue other people. Start setting healthy boundaries and enforcing consequences if those boundaries are violated.*
- Healing a neglect wound requires giving ourselves the space to acknowledge and express any bottled-up emotions that have been stifled, and to let our inner child know that we are there for them.
- *To heal a trust wound, we must build up accountability by following through with any commitments or promises we have made to ourselves. Additionally, try to start surrendering and letting things go more.*

WHY *Conflict* CAN BE GOOD FOR YOU

Do you do everything possible to avoid confrontation? It could be harming your health and your relationships



WORDS TANYA PEAREY

We've all been there. The heat is rising, tempers are flared and the mother of all arguments is about to kick off. But what do you do? Enter a slanging match that ends with nothing resolved? Or are you a peacemaker at any cost, finding yourself biting your tongue, and caving in to the louder and angrier voice? Perhaps conflict makes you panic, so you head for the hills at the first whiff of it. Don't! It's not healthy for you or the relationship - whether that's with your partner, teenage kids, in-laws or colleagues.

"Conflict is going to happen," says relationships expert Jonathan Taylor-Cummings. "But conflict itself is not a problem - it's more about how you handle it. Deal with it well and you can actually strengthen a relationship, and both come out of it stronger. Handle it badly and, very quickly, things can spiral out of control."

Letting rip might make you feel better initially, but afterwards, neither of you will feel good and your relationship may be damaged irreparably. On the flip side, avoiding confrontation can build anger and frustration, and issues don't get sorted. So learning how to deal with discord in a positive way is a valuable skill to develop. Research shows that it's not only good for building stronger connections, it also improves understanding of each other and increases intimacy.

Rules of engagement

The golden rule during disagreements is, "Be careful, not crushing," says Jonathan who, alongside wife Dr Andrea, published *The 4 Habits of All Successful Relationships* (£12.99/\$16, Malcolm Down Publishing). Key

to treading carefully is recognising the state of your relationship with the person you're in conflict with. "Understanding the context of a relationship is important," adds Dr Andrea, as it helps you evaluate whether what you are going to say is likely to land badly.

We also need to rid ourselves of the idea of 'winning' an argument. Instead, the focus should be on finding the best resolution - one that is workable.

"Most of us in a conflict situation do the 'selfish' thing," says Jonathan. We look for the best 'me' outcome - coming out on top or avoiding the confrontation altogether because it makes us feel uncomfortable. We need to seek the best 'us' outcome, where the relationship strengthens through well-managed conflict resolution. One of the best ways to do that with those closest to you, say the couple, is to have established ground rules so that during conflict you have a preprogrammed guide on how to behave constructively. This is particularly effective for relationships with your partner and teenagers.

"In our relationship, for example, there are a number of things we put in place," says Jonathan. "Obviously, we'd never hit each other, but we'd also never walk out of the house in anger - that communicates all sorts of messages of abandonment for us, so it was a big deal. It's OK to go to another room, but don't leave the house. Thirdly, we agreed never to threaten divorce just to hurt or bully each other."

"We did the same with the children," adds Dr Andrea, "because ground rules give boundaries - a safe space to work things out. We said it's OK to be angry, but it's not OK to be rude. So no walking off and slamming doors and being disrespectful. In relationships in general we would say: attack the issue not the person, and praise in public but correct in private."

What's the argument really about?

Conflicts often have underlying messages and contexts. Your anger about muddy footprints in the lounge, for example, usually has a deeper significance than upset at a »

“CONFLICT ITSELF IS NOT A PROBLEM — IT’S MORE ABOUT HOW YOU HANDLE IT”



spoiled carpet. It might be more about the fact that it shows lack of respect and appreciation of the time and care you take keeping the home nice. It can be difficult to unravel hidden meanings at the time, however, so if you repeatedly have the same argument, take time after the event to look beneath the surface. Addressing core issues at a later date can stop them happening in future.

This can be a regular feature of clashes with teens whose self-awareness may not have developed sufficiently to understand exactly why they're feeling upset or frustrated. "The frontal lobes of teenagers' brains - where they do all the rational thinking - is under construction," says Dr Andrea, "so they're often left with their emotional response, which can seem extreme." It's why one minute they can behave like loving, caring individuals and the next like the most thoughtless person on the planet. "As parents, that puts the onus on us to grow up in our relational intelligence," she says, "so we can be that safe stability that anchors them during such an emotionally turbulent time." Don't feel the need to fight every battle.

Bringing to a close

Put a time limit on a conflict. If you're not making headway after 20-30 minutes, agree to take a break, advises Dr Andrea. "Come back with fresh energy - and a fresh perspective." Drawing a line after a dispute is crucial too. "After the conflict is done, the harsh words and heat of the moment passed, it's important to check in on the relationship," says Jonathan. "Ask, are you OK? Apologise if you need to. Even if you think you're 10% to blame and your partner's 90%, take responsibility for your 10%."

Ending on a positive note will help you to reconnect and strengthen your bond. Jonathan says, "People may forget what you said or did, but they never forget how you made them feel." ■

KEEPING YOUR COOL IN THE MOMENT

Expert tips for healthy conflict resolution - whatever the situation. Try LASER focus (Listen, Ask, Speak, Ensure, Restore) during a conflict situation, say Jonathan and Dr Andrea.

LISTEN DEEPLY

"Usually in a conflict situation we are only listening for the pause," says Dr Andrea, and waiting for the next chance to make our point. Instead, really focus on what the other person is saying - and you may have to read between the lines. "Sometimes it's the issue behind the issue," she says.

ASK FOR CLARITY

Before responding, make sure you really have understood what the other person is saying. Repeat it back to them to confirm. "A lot of times that, in itself, can immediately diffuse the conflict," says Dr Andrea, "when you realise there was a misunderstanding between what they said and what you understood them to be saying." Conflict is often inflamed by miscommunication during an argument.

SPEAK SOFTLY

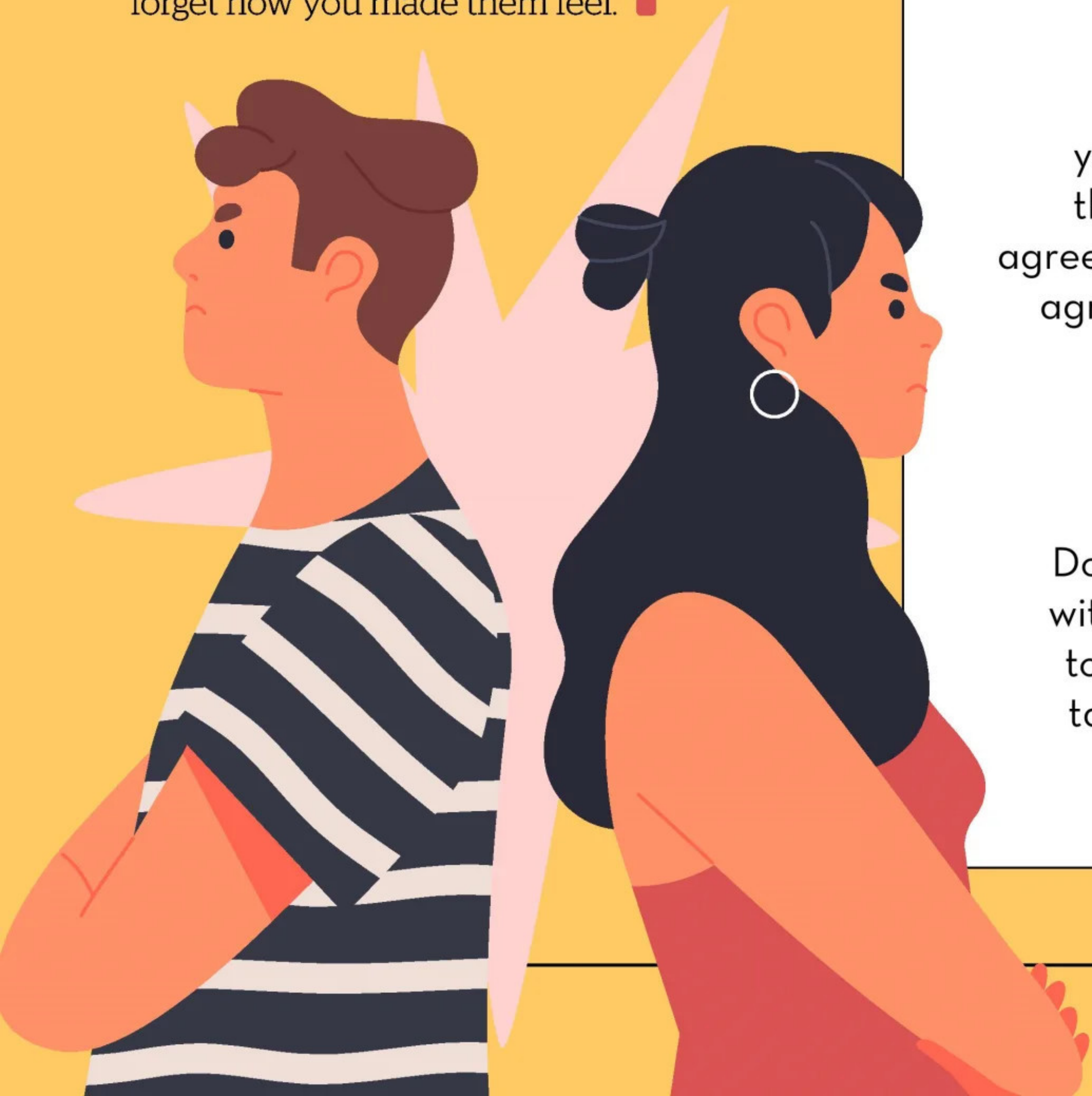
This can immediately have a calming effect on the situation. If you raise your voice, the listener is likely to stop listening to what you are saying and, instead, will only focus on your tone of voice. This in itself can often be enough to trigger an attack or defend mode. "Be clear about what you want to say in return, but always speak softly," advises Dr Andrea. "We don't have to speak harshly, even when we are being direct."

ENSURE YOU AGREE ON CHANGES

Once you have both had the opportunity to talk about how you feel and what you need, agree how you are going to resolve the situation in a way in which you are both happy. If you cannot agree on this at the time, when feelings may be running very high, simply agree that you are both going to come back with some suggestions. Fix a time and place to do this if you need to.

RESTORE WARMTH

Don't just leave it there - no matter how happy both of you may be with the resolution, you still need to reconnect afterwards. A hug, a touch on the shoulder or a simple 'Are you OK?' may be all that it takes for you to do this. "It's about sending the message that you are loved, valued and respected," says Jonathan.



THE GIFT OF Compassion

Many of us find it hard to treat ourselves with the kindness and compassion we willingly give to others, but it's essential we do it

WORDS CLAIRE CANTOR

Compassion is the willingness to help others, show kindness and caring when they are suffering, and try to help relieve their pain. 'Self'-compassion is offering that kindness to yourself.

We are our own worst enemy. Blaming and criticising ourselves, telling ourselves we should be better/do more/achieve more. If we don't match up to our standards and rules of living, the self-bullying only gets worse.

We understand that beating ourselves up is counterproductive. Yet we reserve our understanding for others. We consider self-nurturing as indulgent, and worry we may take our foot off the pedal and let ourselves go. No one can convince us that we *too* are worthy of love. No new job, another person, or attaining our 'ideal' weight is going to change how we feel about ourselves. Offering ourselves self-compassion can help to relieve us from the self-defeating messages. Follow these steps to get started.

“ WE RESERVE OUR UNDERSTANDING FOR OTHERS. WE CONSIDER SELF-NURTURING AS INDULGENT ”

NOTICE AND ACKNOWLEDGE YOUR SUFFERING

Be mindful of your default patterns, habitual behaviours and thoughts.

Recognising, 'Ah these are my negative thoughts again' helps break the cycle of believing them.

OFFER KINDNESS TO YOURSELF.

Let go of self-criticism, and offer yourself the sort of kindness you would give to others if they were struggling. Ask 'What do I really need right now?'

WIDEN YOUR PERSPECTIVE.

When we struggle we feel alone, resentful, inward looking. Seeing

ourselves as part of this flawed, imperfect, complex human race can be comforting.

LIBERATE YOURSELF FROM EXTERNAL VALIDATION.

Let go of the craving for approval and validation - try not to align your future inner happiness with how you are perceived by others.

HAVE COURAGE AND RELINQUISH SELF-JUDGEMENT.

Self-compassion demands courage to do hard things. You may have reacted a certain way in the past; allow yourself the possibility of going down a different path. ■



LET'S TALK *Accents*

Accents can speak volumes about who we are – or, rather, who people perceive us to be

WORDS KATHERINE BEBO

Are you posh, Miss? Do you know the Queen?" These are questions that former teacher Sarah Bramall faced from her pupils when she was working at schools in Leeds and Bradford. As a southerner, her northern students made certain assumptions about her life, upbringing and 'friends in high places'. Which we all do - either consciously or unconsciously - when we hear a person's accent. Sarah has since changed career and is now a mindset and leadership coach, working alongside Rebecca Daniel, who says:

"Unconsciously, we have already judged a person on our first encounter with them by the way they look, their behaviours and the way they talk." This is known as unconscious bias... and it's rife.



Judged out of a job

From talking to salespeople or tradespeople, chatting to parents at the school gates, or watching people on the television, we all make split-second assumptions about a person's intelligence, education, class and wealth based on how they talk. In 2009, when Dagenham-born Stacey Solomon auditioned for *The X Factor*, the jubilant surprise between the judges was palpable when she belted out a beautiful rendition of 'What a Wonderful World' (sans accent), having just been talking in her 'ditzzy' Essex tones. "I don't know why I had a preconceived idea but I didn't expect it to be that good," judged Cheryl Tweedy. We all know why she had a preconceived idea - because we probably had the same one. In a later interview, Stacey asserted: "I think I seem thicker than I am... People underestimate me because I've got a common accent."

Geordie Cheryl has a strong regional accent herself, which stood to get in the way of her career. Just two weeks after she made her debut as one of the judges on the US *X Factor*, she was ousted by the show's executives, deeming her accent "too thick" for American audiences to understand. But it's not just A-listers who may lose out on a job due to the way they talk. Speaking of her former schools, Sarah explains: "They insisted that the students speak 'Standard English' while in school, for fear that they would not be adequately prepared for the job market without the ability to moderate their spoken language." Indeed, research has shown that 28% of people feel they have been discriminated against due to their accent in a professional setting, while 20% admitted to adapting their accent during a job interview.

Changing colours

Job interviews are just one setting where people may adapt their accents. Therapist and author Sally Baker says, "People with regional accents are well aware of the prejudice of the metropolitan elite and will often consciously minimise or conceal their original accent in a bid to fit in." Rebecca

“WE MAKE SPLIT-SECOND ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT A PERSON BASED ON HOW THEY TALK”



recalls her father adapting his accent when he was talking to his colleagues from East London. "His strong Nigerian accent would often have hints of cockney slang and an East End accent - all in an attempt to build rapport, connection and to fit in." On the flipside, those who speak with received pronunciation (RP) - which has been described as 'typically British' - may adapt how they speak in order to sound less 'posh' and more approachable. Perhaps they'll drop their aitches or adopt th-fronting - pronouncing 'th' as 'f' ('fink' instead of 'think') or 'th' as 'v' ('bave' instead of 'bathe').

Code-switching - when a speaker alternates between two or more language

varieties based on the social context - happens for a number of reasons:

FITTING IN

People may modify their accents to be more accepted by their peers, particularly when individuals move to a new location or are part of a minority group. "We have an evolutionary impulse to want to fit in as part of a 'tribe'," explains Sarah.

IMPROVING COMMUNICATION

Sometimes people adapt their accents to allow others to understand »

HIDE AND SPEAK



Lifestyle and organisation coach Jessica Barclay talks about why she's always adapted her accent to fit in.

"I copy accents so much, despite loving my own Home Counties one. If I spend a lot of time talking to my northern friends or my dad, I have to put *Downton Abbey* on to rebalance! I've spent a lifetime masking to try to fit in, so I mirror other people all the time. I was diagnosed with dyslexia at around seven, but I had undiagnosed ADHD [attention deficit hyperactivity disorder] and ASD [autism spectrum disorder], so I never felt like I fitted in, and mirroring others' speech is the easiest way to try to do that. Mirroring is tiring, even when you do it unintentionally, but it's also a useful tool."

“BY MIMICKING A PERSON'S BODY LANGUAGE OR ACCENT, WE TRY TO COME ACROSS AS LESS THREATENING AND MORE LIKEABLE”

them. “This may come from having empathy towards other people,” explains psychologist Anna Sergent.

AVOIDING DISCRIMINATION

Accent adaptation can be a way to avoid negative judgments based on how someone speaks. By altering their accent, people may feel they can prevent certain biases and stereotypes.

SOCIAL MOBILITY

Some people may adopt a more prestigious accent to signal higher social status or to gain opportunities – either in a professional or social capacity.

Anna says that mirroring the people we spend the most time with could change our accent, too. “This may happen unconsciously as part of a human social interaction effect, where we naturally gravitate towards staying in tune with other people,” she explains. In the 1990s, psychologists Tanya Chartrand and John Bargh discovered a psychological phenomenon called the chameleon effect – or unintentional mirroring. By unintentionally mimicking a person's body language, facial expressions, hand gestures, voice modulation or accent, we try to come across as less threatening and more likeable. Well, as Oscar Wilde (who shed his Irish accent when he moved to Oxford) said: “Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery.”

Accent neutralisation

Different accents carry with them different perceptions. In a study involving 7,500 people from various different countries – the US, UK, France, Germany, Spain, Italy, Poland and Canada – different words were



TALK THE TALK

Behavioural psychologist Justin Gasparovic reveals, “Our assumptions about accents can be positive and negative, depending on the specific accent and our background and experiences.” Here, he explains some common assumptions associated with accents.

INTELLIGENCE

Certain accents are perceived as more intelligent or educated than others. For example, in the United States, a Northeastern accent may be perceived as more intellectual, while a Southern accent may be associated with lower levels of education.

TRUSTWORTHINESS

People tend to trust others who speak with a similar accent to them.

SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS

Accents can serve as markers of social class, with certain accents being associated with higher or lower socioeconomic status. Listeners may make assumptions about a person's upbringing, education and income based on their accent.

PERSONALITY TRAITS

Some accents may be perceived as more friendly and approachable, while others may be seen as more reserved or aloof.

attributed to different accents. American accents were described as 'friendly', 'assertive', 'straightforward', 'funny' and 'uneducated'. German and Russian accents were considered 'harsh', while the French one was 'sexy'. Italians were deemed 'passionate', Brits 'sophisticated', and those with Caribbean accents, 'friendly'.

Another study asked 2,221 people to listen to 15 British accents and say which ones they found the most trustworthy. The bottom of the list was the Birmingham (Brummie) accent, with only 4% of people finding it the most trustworthy, while the Yorkshire accent came out on top. The 60% of people who found it the most trustworthy described it as 'intelligent' and 'calming'. Hence why a lot of voiceovers in advertising use the Yorkshire accent – and why many call centres were set up in the area.

When it comes to call centres elsewhere, some consumers are ashamed to admit that when a non-British person comes on the phone, this instantly puts their back up because they think the customer service they'll receive will be subpar. Initially, employees in Indian call centres were trained to speak (as far as they could) in British and American accents, but the preference soon evolved towards 'accent neutralisation' and a more 'neutral global accent'. Workers had to relearn pronunciations of words such as 'laboratory', which Indians naturally pronounce with the stress on the second syllable.

Now, voice-altering technology has been introduced into more than 1,000 call centres in the Philippines and India in a bid to make workers sound more like Westerners. This scenario calls to mind the 2018 film *Sorry to Bother You*, in which a Black man hired as a telemarketer is told by a colleague that to make more money, he should "use your white voice." He takes this advice and becomes a top salesman. Although the movie is a comedy, the fact that society is so prejudiced towards certain accents is no laughing matter. As accents can identify us as belonging to a particular social group, this form of linguistic discrimination goes hand in hand with other forms of discrimination, such as racism, sexism, classism and heterosexism.

Hardwired from birth

"The judgements we make about other people's accents say more about us than it does about them," asserts Sally. Some people may hear a regional accent and assume that the speaker is less intelligent than someone who speaks RP, or that someone with a foreign accent isn't as brainy as someone who has English as a first language. This assumption often occurs unconsciously, but once your conscious thought kicks in, you may realise that if someone is talking to you in a foreign accent, they

are actually intelligent enough to be able to speak (at least) two languages.

Some may argue that it's not our 'fault' that we make judgements based on someone's accent, though, and that it's a trait ingrained in us from birth. Scientists discovered that babies begin to learn language from their mothers while still in the womb. Infants who are only a few hours old can differentiate between their native language and a foreign language. Research has also shown that the preference for native accents above foreign accents is hardwired at a very young age. Katherine Kinzler and colleagues from Harvard University tested 24 infants, aged five to six months – from households that only spoke English – and found that the babies had a preference for English speakers above those speaking Spanish. It was also found that older infants of ten months preferred to accept toys from women who spoke their native language.

Sense of belonging

Our accent is one of the ways in which we express ourselves as individuals. The way we pronounce vowels and consonants, and use differences in rhythm, stress and intonation is, quite literally, how we voice our identity. We use our linguistic experience to position ourselves in the social world. Yes, we have a 'natural' accent based on where we grew up and other socioeconomic factors, but

we also have control over how we adapt our accent, if we so choose. But what happens if this choice is removed? What if – like comedian Lee Ridley, aka 'Lost Voice Guy' and winner of 2018's *Britain's Got Talent* – people lose their voice due to illnesses such as cerebral palsy? While speech-generating devices may restore these people's ability to communicate, they haven't historically done much for the user in the way of maintaining their identity. Getting his first communication device at the age of eight, Lee has said how "lonely and isolated" he felt because his accent was so different to that of his friends. In 2021, tired of sounding like a "posh RoboCop," he embarked on a campaign to find a person willing to 'donate' their Geordie/County Durham accent to him for use on his device. Out of around 500 applicants, he announced on his blog post entitled 'Whey aye, I'm gannin' to be propa Geordie' that he had settled on a person who sounded most similar to his family from Consett in County Durham. "It means a lot to finally sound like my family and friends," he said.

Whether they are used to confirm a bias; as a method to generate a certain persona; manipulated by companies to increase business; or as is the case with Lee, prized as a way of showing you belong to a tribe, accents run deeper than just how someone speaks. ■



CAN A HEART REALLY BE

Broken?

Romantic relationships might have more of an impact on your physical health than you realise

WORDS ELEANOR VOUSDEN
& ROSE GOODMAN

Have you experienced turmoil at some point over the years? You might remember feeling strong physical sensations along with deep emotions. Maybe you had a pit in your stomach or a deep ache in your chest after a break-up. While this is normal, in some cases a sudden shock or getting terrible news can also lead to a serious change in the way your heart functions. Medically called takotsubo cardiomyopathy, 'broken heart syndrome' (BHS) is experienced by about 3,000 people

in the UK each year, and nine out of ten of those affected are women. Here, our experts get to the heart of this condition.

The pain is real

Symptoms of BHS mimic those of a heart attack. "It usually occurs in people who have experienced physically and/or emotionally stressful events, such as a bereavement," says Ruth Goss, senior cardiac nurse at the British Heart Foundation. "However, in around 30% of cases there is no identifiable trigger." Research is still ongoing, but scientists believe that this stress results in a surge of adrenaline to the heart.

"This causes the left ventricle (the bottom left chamber of the heart, which is responsible for pumping blood out of the heart and around the body) to balloon and weaken suddenly," says Ruth. "It means that the heart can't pump blood around the body properly – and, in some cases, these changes can lead to other heart problems, like heart failure, for example."

BHS versus heart attack

The main difference between the two is that a heart attack is caused by a blockage in one of the coronary arteries that supply blood to the heart muscle. Patients with takotsubo syndrome don't have this blockage.

"It's only when doctors do further tests to examine the coronary arteries that they will see that there are no blockages, as there would be after a heart attack," says Ruth. "Instead, an echocardiogram (an ultrasound of the heart) will show that the heart muscle is not working properly and the left ventricle is larger than normal."

Who is affected and how?

While we may think our emotions were most volatile in our teenage years, it's actually middle-aged and older women who are diagnosed with BHS up to ten times more often than younger women or men of any age.* It's believed this is due to the female hormone oestrogen helping to protect the heart from the harmful effects of adrenaline, so women, in particular, become vulnerable to the effects of sudden stress as they age and their oestrogen levels drop.

BHS can cause so much pain, some sufferers will end up in hospital, often with a suspected heart attack. Because of the life-threatening electrical instability of the heart during the early stages of attack, many are admitted to a specialist coronary care unit for at least two days.

"There is no consensus on longer-term measures," says consultant cardiologist Dr Dana Dawson of the University of Aberdeen. "There haven't been any clinical trials yet to explore medicines that may help the heart recover better

or prevent recurrence, although we're learning all the time."

Luckily, you can expect to recover from the medical effects of a wounded heart, although research reveals it may take up to four months**. This is because the strenuous movements of the heart are still impaired for months after an attack, and scarring can occur, reducing

elasticity and preventing the heart from contracting properly. This partly explains the small risk of death, even years later.

Always seek immediate medical help if you experience chest pain and shortness of breath for anything from a few minutes to hours, days or weeks after severe emotional or physical stress. If you have concerns about your health, speak to your doctor. ■

NATURAL STRESS BUSTERS

Adopting these daily habits can help take care of your heart, and reduce your risk of Broken Heart Syndrome (BHS).

CONNECTION

Oxytocin is a calming, feel-good hormone that is released when we feel love, comfort and trust. Do you have a fluffy friend at home? Stroking your companion animal can also release this hormone***, so spend quality time with a cat or dog to melt away tension.

MINDFUL BREATHING

- Place one hand on your upper chest and one on your stomach, just below your belly.
- *Slowly breathe out as you count to 11.*
- Pause and then breathe in to the count of seven.
- *Repeat twice.*

Try to make sure that the hand placed on your stomach is the only part that moves. When stressed, we take shallow breaths using the top of our chests. Learn to breathe more deeply to help calm your mind and body quickly.

MOVEMENT

Exercise burns up adrenaline and other stress hormones, while relaxing muscles and improving sleep. "In general, any gentle or moderate exercise can be helpful," says nutritionist Cassandra Barns. "Movement stimulates the gut, relieving problems such as bloating and constipation, and doing something you enjoy will help lower your stress levels," she adds.

“IT MAY TAKE UP TO FOUR MONTHS TO RECOVER FROM THE MEDICAL EFFECTS OF A WOUNDED HEART”

FEELING SENSITIVE? MAKE IT YOUR Superpower

*Being emotionally delicate can be challenging,
but it can also be your greatest asset*

WORDS DEBRA WATERS

Are you easily hurt or overwhelmed? Feel things deeply? You may be a Highly Sensitive Person (HSP), and knowing this could help you face life's challenges. "Often referred to as 'sensory processing sensitivity', American psychologist Elaine

Aron recognised that a collection of traits aren't good or bad - just different," explains counsellor Carley Symes*.

Being a HSP is a personality trait - not a mental health diagnosis, and science backs it up. "HSPs produce more brain activity related to emotions when watching facial expressions of other people," says Jamie

PROS VERSUS CONS

PROS

- Creative
- **Empathic**
- Intuitive
- **Supportive**
- Conscientious, with an eye for detail
- **Deeply appreciative of beauty, with a refined sense of taste and smell**
- Nurturing towards people, animals and the environment

CONS

- Easily overwhelmed (prioritise quiet time; don't skip meals or sleep; avoid large crowds, upsetting shows or news reports; and manage your time wisely)
- **Intense feelings** (set boundaries and limit contact with people you find draining)
- Struggle with anxiety and conflict (therapy can provide coping strategies)



Ward, professor of cognitive neuroscience at the University of Sussex. Yet acute sensitivity is often seen as a weakness – even though it has evolutionary advantages. “Research suggests that having HSPs in your population gives you a better chance of survival – it’s developed to monitor threats, such as subtle social rifts,” explains Carley. HSPs were the ones on high alert, ready to spot danger – it was then up to our less sensitive companions to leap to action, she suggests.

We don’t need someone to spot sabre-toothed tigers any more, but HSPs are still vital. “HSPs are conscientious, deep-thinking, valuable individuals,” says Carley. Their understanding of emotions helps others. “There’s evidence that HSPs catch the mood of people around them, which could certainly be a good thing – for example, to respond appropriately to someone else’s feelings,” adds Jamie.

But HSPs are susceptible to feeling drained or overwhelmed, so self-preservation is essential. “An optimal solution would be learning when to tune in to others and when to put up barriers,” suggests Jamie.

HSPs and pain

It’s not all about emotions; some medical professionals believe that HSPs are more vulnerable to pain too.

“HSPs tend to become easily stressed and, therefore, more prone to illnesses, including persistent pain,” explains Valentina Buscemi**, a physiotherapist in complex pain conditions and HSP self-management coach. “As HSPs need more time to process information, pain management programmes should be delivered at a slower pace and tailored to individual needs.” HSPs can also be more sensitive to medication.

Valentina recommends reducing stress, practising self-care (such as walking in nature or exercising) and managing bodily signals as they arise (such as tiredness and muscle tension).

There’s also acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) – a form of CBT that combines mindfulness with acceptance. “ACT works well with HSPs because it’s holistic,” says Valentina. “Living with persistent pain can make people feel stuck. ACT helps them move forward by finding strategies to overcome barriers.”

Cherish your sensitivity

BE KIND TO YOURSELF

“Sensitivity is a trait that needs looking after,” says Carley.

TRY COGNITIVE REAPPRAISAL

“Accept that your feelings are OK and not a sign of problems,” says Jamie.



TAKE REGULAR BREAKS

Find somewhere peaceful. “Sit with eyes closed, use earplugs – whatever you need,” says Carley.

BELIEVE IN YOUR FEELINGS

HSPs are often told to push feelings aside. “Trust there’s nothing wrong with you,” says Carley.

USE RELAXATION TECHNIQUES

Mediation, yoga and breathing exercises help to calm the body and mind.

FIND THE RIGHT THERAPIST

Sensitivity doesn’t necessarily need fixing. “It’s not helpful to label every deep feeling as a sign of a HSP but, likewise, it’s not helpful to look for resolution to deep feelings if what’s needed is acceptance for HSP traits,” says Carley.

Take the test: hsperson.com/test/highly-sensitive-test

‘THERE ARE LOTS OF POSITIVES’

Jess Rad, 40, is a self-diagnosed

– and self-empowered – HSP

“I came across Elaine Aron’s concept when my firstborn appeared to be extra sensitive to stimuli. I encountered this idea that resonated, took the test and scored 26/27! The penny-dropping moments haven’t stopped – for example, when I have two children talking simultaneously with the radio on and the chatter in my mind is loud, it becomes too much!

There are lots of positives. I notice and feel more, I live life in Technicolor. I’ve learnt to embrace it – I’ve discovered that being able to tune into the needs and emotions of those around me is a superpower. After feeling like a shy person during my childhood, throughout my adult life I’ve had the ability to build a rapport quickly and easily with people. Now I use this for the greater good and I founded thewomenhood.com – a platform that supports and connects women.

The downsides are that I have to avoid overwhelming situations and to be careful who I spend time with because their moods impact my own. I explain that I’m a ‘sensitive soul’. Previously, this may have felt like something to feel ashamed of. Now, I have a greater sense of confidence, self-acceptance and self-compassion.”

THE CHALLENGES OF Midlife

Our middle-aged years are a period of change, challenge and reflection, which can cause turmoil and crisis. But it can also be a positive and uplifting time

WORDS JULIE BASSETT

We've all heard of the 'midlife crisis', often as a cliché to describe someone who makes bad decisions or life choices in their 40s and 50s. It's a humorous plot point in sitcoms; it's a story to gossip about among friends; it's an excuse for rash actions; it's a marketing angle for the latest sports car. But researchers and psychologists disagree over whether such a phenomenon really exists, or whether it's simply a social construct in our modern lives. Have we all been conditioned to believe that being in our midlife is something worth having a crisis over, then when we get to the right age, it's almost an inevitability? Or are there real environmental, circumstantial and psychological factors that create a true period of turmoil in the middle of our life?

It's an area that's still being researched, studied and explored, with new theories all the time. However, for those who do experience an unsettled midlife, presenting it as trivial or applying unhelpful stereotypes

undermines the real challenges that navigating this time of life can bring. Being in our middle age, that ill-defined point between youth and old age, is a time in our lives that comes with huge changes that can lead to us questioning our purpose and identity.

What constitutes a 'midlife crisis' will vary from person to person - there is no set definition or pattern - but there are some signs and symptoms, similarities and shared experiences that might highlight the beginning of a new period of life. In this article, we explore what a midlife crisis might look like, why it's an experience that comes at a certain age, and how to navigate it, even turning it into a positive transition that can enhance your life going forward. If we embrace midlife, and understand the reasons behind our 'crisis', we can look forward to true joy, fulfilment and happiness in our middle years. »



“ HAVE WE BEEN CONDITIONED
TO BELIEVE THAT BEING IN OUR
MIDLIFE IS SOMETHING WORTH
HAVING A CRISIS OVER? ”



GENDER DIFFERENCES

Men and women may experience a midlife crisis in different ways. Men may be more likely to feel trapped, and want to make changes in their life – which can be looking for a new job, buying a car, starting a gym routine and so on. They may also feel a lot of pressure around masculinity and expectations, which can prompt them to think about their life and who they are, and whether they live up to a certain stereotype.

For women, the midlife period coincides with huge hormonal changes and a transition to a different biological phase of life. If they have spent a lot of time as the primary caregiver for children, for example, their role as ‘mother’ or ‘partner’ may have been all-consuming. This can mean that midlife is a chance to focus on themselves for the first time and consider their own needs, which can be eye-opening, but also a little overwhelming.

What we mean by ‘midlife crisis’

‘Midlife crisis’ is a term often used to describe a period in our lives where we might experience emotional turmoil, question our identity, ponder what we want out of life, and yearn for change. Most commonly, this occurs between the ages of 40 and 60, but it’s important to say that not everyone goes through this experience, and it can occur outside of this age range.

The term ‘midlife crisis’ was first introduced by a psychologist called Elliot Jaques, in a 1965 paper he wrote on the working patterns of creative geniuses, such as composers and artists. He noticed a pattern of decline in productivity or sudden changes in style from around the age of 35.

Later, in 1974, author Gail Sheehy brought the phrase into modern usage, crediting Jaques for the term, in her book *Passages*.

This book gained huge popularity, being one of the first to simply and effectively explain the journey through adult life. She wrote about the different phases we can expect, from the ‘Trying 20s’, where we begin to try out the possibilities of adult life, and into the ‘Catch 30s’ when we might begin to make deeper commitments towards the life we want. She then moves into the Forlorn 40s, when we have to face up to saying goodbye to our youth, question our life’s path and begin a time of self-discovery, before moving into the ‘Refreshed (or Resigned) 50s’. The book helped readers to navigate the crises of adulthood, including the midlife, in a way that no one had explained before. It has dated over time, as modern life is quite different now to what it was in the 1970s, but many of the experiences that she explores are still common.

In a 2000 survey* on midlife in the USA, 26% of those surveyed said that they had experienced a midlife crisis, however, for most this actually happened before age 40 or after age 50, a little outside the parameters of our actual biological ‘midlife’. The survey also found that, notably, for the majority of those who said that they had suffered a midlife crisis, it was triggered by an event and not their age. So, a midlife crisis can happen because of circumstance, and not simply due to the process of ageing. It just so happens that the midlife is a time in our lives that can come with a great deal of change and transition.

Period of change

Whenever we experience big life changes, this can trigger a period of reflection and anxiety, impacting on our self-confidence and self-esteem. There are many of these changes happening all at once in midlife. During our midlife we may experience things like seeing our children grow up and move on, separation from a long-term partner, a big career change, new caring responsibilities for a parent, new health conditions, loss, and a growing awareness of our own mortality. We may also be filled with regret of choices we’ve made or things we’ve done/not done. We might find ourselves feeling restless, impulsive, anxious or apprehensive. For women, it also coincides with the menopause, and the physical, emotional and psychological changes that can bring in itself. But there can also be many positive changes in this time of life too.

A 2015 paper** by Margie E Lachman (et al), describes this ‘pivotal period’: “There is the stark reality for those in the middle of life, who are often faced with juggling multiple responsibilities and dealing with emerging physical and cognitive signs of ageing, and they may experience a good deal of stress trying to handle it all. Yet, midlife can also be



a peak time in many areas, including earnings, position at work, leadership in the family, decision-making abilities, self-confidence, and contributions to the community.”

For most people, midlife will come with its challenges and changes, but it doesn't always mean a crisis. However, for others, the changes in midlife can trigger mental health conditions, such as depression and anxiety. It's therefore important that this isn't overlooked or written off as a 'just a midlife crisis', when there are health and wellbeing issues that need to be addressed and treated. 'Midlife crisis' isn't a mental health disorder or condition, but there are circumstances where experiencing a midlife crisis might be a contributing factor towards changes in mood or a depressive episode. However, depression and anxiety can be experienced at any age, and not always in response to a particular event or circumstance. And not everyone who has a midlife crisis will experience depression or anxiety.

There is some data that supports an increase in problems around our midlife years, particularly in richer countries like the UK and USA. Recent research (The Midlife Crisis. Giuntella et al. 2022), looked specifically at 'extreme measures of mental distress' and occurrence by age. Using modern datasets and conventional statistical methods, the paper found 'hill-shaped' patterns in data (ie peaking in midlife) from a variety of sources in areas like sleeping problems, extreme depression, intense job strain, suicidal feelings and suicide, alcohol dependence, and concentration and memory problems. At the same time, other

studies have found that happiness follows a 'U' curve, dropping to its lowest in midlife.

The concept and experience of a midlife crisis isn't universal - some countries and communities report greater incidences than others. However, there are some common triggers that may lead to this period of reflection and uncertainty, which tend to happen in the midlife years.

Changes in the family dynamic

In the middle years of our life, we may find huge shifts start to happen within our family environment, over which we can exert very little control. For those who have children, the inevitability of their ageing may start to hit us. Long gone are the days of sleepless nights, dirty nappies and never-ending school runs. As our children grow into teenagers, they start to exert their own independence and build their own personalities, needing us less than ever before. And then, all too soon, they are gone, off out into the world and starting their own adult lives. The 'empty nest syndrome', a sadness that follows when the last of our children has left home, can trigger feelings of loneliness and uncertainty. If we have, until now, built our identity around being a parent, who do we now become? Who are we without the day-to-day caring responsibilities of a child?

We may find ourselves spending far more time with our partner than before. This in itself can be a huge change. Relationships can often be built around the family, and when it's back to being just the adults once again, this can change the dynamic.

“MIDLIFE WILL COME WITH ITS CHALLENGES AND CHANGES, BUT IT DOESN'T ALWAYS MEAN A CRISIS”

For some, this can be an incredible time of bonding and adventure; for others it can be a sad realisation that the relationship doesn't work as well outside the children. As both partners start to re-evaluate what they want out of the rest of their life, this might involve some compromise to accommodate both people's needs, or maybe it becomes apparent that you both want different things.

On the other hand, the opposite might happen - you might have been looking forward to a new-found freedom and time as a couple when your children grow up, and then they don't leave as expected. There are some studies that show that young adults today need more support and remain in the family home longer than ever before. This may change the dynamic of what you expected your midlife to look like.

Quite often midlife is also when we might have to adopt some extra caring responsibilities for our parents in their later life. This can vary from checking in more often or having to arrange support for them, to having them move in. Again, this can add a lot of stress and strain to the home life that wasn't there before. Or you may even have to cope with serious illness in your parents, or a loss, which can be hugely traumatic and something that can trigger a lot of feelings and emotions.

Careers and finances

Another area that might cause us to re-evaluate our life in our 40s and 50s is work and money. For some, this might be a time of great financial freedom. Maybe you've been lucky enough to pay off your mortgage, opening up a lot more flexibility around your money. Or maybe your outgoings have stabilised in other ways - not having to pay so much for childcare, for example, or you've dealt with past debt. This can open up new possibilities and options for your life, such as travelling or changing career.

If you've been in your job role for a long time, it's not uncommon to start to consider options. You may have reached a good position in your career, have security and »

TYPES OF CRISIS

There are a number of different crises that we may come across in life, and these can all be a challenge to overcome.

A DEVELOPMENTAL CRISIS is a crisis due to a natural, predictable development that you may experience in life. This starts young with going through puberty, and can include other things like leaving home, getting married, giving birth and retirement.

A SITUATIONAL CRISIS is related to a traumatic or sudden event, such as an accident or natural disaster, or an unexpected outcome like a divorce or being fired.

AN EXISTENTIAL CRISIS is an inner conflict, usually in search for purpose, meaning or identity in life. This is where a midlife crisis falls.



“ WE HAVE A REALISATION AT THIS AGE THAT WE ARE COMING TO THE SECOND HALF OF OUR LIFE ”

a steady income, but you might also be feeling a little bored and unchallenged. It's not unusual to think about a career change in midlife - we work for so many years these days, retirement being further away than ever, that it's possible to have a completely new second career. Or if you've given up a lot of your working life to caring responsibilities, you might be feeling like now is the time that you can upskill and dedicate time and energy to your future.

This can cause a lot of thought, reflection and worry. It can be scary considering trying something new, especially if it means stepping back from something you know and something that offers a regular income. But you may also feel like it's now or never, and that you need to follow a passion and do something you love.

All of these considerations can build towards that feeling of unease and uncertainty in midlife, but they can also contribute towards a sense of excitement and possibility.

The encroaching awareness of mortality

It's thought that one of the biggest reasons that many people suffer from a midlife crisis is due to an awareness of our own mortality. This can be triggered due to losing someone close to us, possibly even a friend of a

similar age. Or we might be diagnosed with a health condition or have a serious accident, which can be a traumatic and unnerving experience. We have a heightened realisation at this age that we are coming to the second half of our life, and that in itself can be a stark reminder that we are indeed mortal. This sensation can creep in over time, or it can be thrust upon us due to circumstance.

In *Passages*, Gail Sheehy writes: “As we reach midlife in the middle thirties or early forties, we become susceptible to the idea of our own perishability. If an accident that interrupts our life occurs at this time, our fears of mortality are heightened. We are not prepared for the idea that time can run out on us, or for the startling truth that if we don't hurry to pursue our own definition of a meaningful existence, life can become a repetition of trivial maintenance duties.”

This confrontation of mortality can manifest in a number of ways. We may want to embark on a health and wellbeing journey to maximise our time, by getting into good shape and eating well. It's no wonder that there are numerous online and gym-based programmes aimed at wellness in midlife - they prey upon our fears just at the time we're realising them. We're surrounded by Instagram influencers in their 50s showing us what it means to be fit in midlife, and

giving terrifying warnings of what might happen if we don't change our lifestyles.

This also coincides with a desire for some people to feel young again, to capture and reignite the energy and vitality of youth. This can lead to making cosmetic changes to look more youthful, from blending out the greys to more extreme surgical solutions. Even for those who are comfortable with their body and appearance in midlife, the thought of mortality can inject a desire to feel alive. This might mean trying new things and pushing outside of our comfort zone. After all, it's now or never.

With all of these factors, it's no wonder that we start to ponder upon the meaning of our lives. As we navigate through these changing circumstances, we are constantly having to stop and ask questions. We start to wonder who we really are, who are friends and partners should be, what jobs we should have...

It's a time for considering our own identity, and whether we're happy with the person we've become. And if not, what can we do to bring ourselves back on track towards who we want to be for the rest of our lives. Are we living the life we want? Or just what is expected of us? This process can be unsettling and difficult, or it can be enlightening and empowering. Sometimes, even, all of the above.

Coping strategies

If you've read this article and identified that you're experiencing some kind of midlife crisis, what now? Well, we might try to cope with it in a number of different ways. If we're afraid of the future, our mortality and not knowing where we are in our lives, it's normal and expected to try to hunt for a reasonable solution. This means that we might try to find a cure or treatment to alleviate our situation. Or we might try to ignore what's happening to us, and carry on with our normal lives among the discontentment. This often isn't successful, as our feelings deserve to be acknowledged and addressed - there is a whole second half of our life to go, and we owe it to ourselves to be authentic, happy and fulfilled.

Instead, there are ways that we can cope through an unsettled period of life that may help us to put things into perspective and navigate the challenges of midlife more easily. Feeling unsure, unsettled and reflective can be exhausting, and drain us of our energy each day. Therefore, living a healthy lifestyle can reap a number of benefits.

If we focus on being active through exercise that we enjoy, this can help us to have more energy and feel our best. It can also help to alleviate some worries around our health and wellbeing, with physical activity being a great way to reduce risk

SIGNS OF A MIDLIFE CRISIS

There are no set criteria as to what constitutes a midlife crisis. Because it's not something that can be diagnosed, it's a difficult area to study. Researchers themselves disagree on what a midlife crisis means, and we'll all have our own individual perceptions of what a midlife crisis means to us. However, there are some signs and symptoms that may be identified. For example, you may notice behavioural changes, which can include things like withdrawing from normal routines and social occasions, frequent changes in mood, an increase in negative emotions like anger or sadness, an increase in anxiety, making irrational or impulsive decisions, or indulging in compulsive habits. Some people might struggle with their weight, either losing or gaining, which could be due to a frantic need to diet and exercise (a desire to reclaim a youthful figure, for example), or through overeating due to boredom and restlessness, as well as hormonal changes. There may be noticeable changes in sleep patterns, focus, energy and motivation. There may be decisions made that are unexpected or out of character too, such as ending long-term relationships or starting new ones, making big career changes, or wanting to move house. If someone is spending a lot of time re-evaluating their lives, they may be introspective, spend a lot of time daydreaming or become indecisive.

factors of future health problems. Exercise can help us to maintain strength, flexibility and independence throughout our life. It can also help us with our self-esteem, as well as relieve stress and anxiety.

Eating a balanced diet can also help. This can improve our health, help maintain a healthy weight, and give us the energy that we need. Sometimes in midlife we can experience weight gain, often due to hormonal activity and reduced movement. Food can play a big role in how we feel, which can impact on how well we cope with midlife challenges.

It's also important to explore some aspects of mindfulness and self-awareness. If you're feeling overwhelmed with new emotions, feelings and uncertainty, it can be helpful to start some practices of reflection. You may find it helpful to start a journal, for example, to help you work through the way you are feeling. You might also want to list gratitudes every day, so you can focus on those things in your life that make you happy, while working your way through those things that don't. You could also try introducing mindfulness exercises to help you stay more present in your life, which can ground you in the 'now' rather than worrying about what the future may hold or dwelling on the past.

Embracing the midlife and moving forward

Midlife doesn't have to be a crisis; it can be a wonderful, exciting period of time where you can develop and grow into the person you want to be, and shape the rest of your life. You have many, many years ahead of you, and while they could be very different to the years you've already lived, they can be filled with happiness.

There is a common misconception about old age - the steady decline towards frailty. But we have the power to start now towards building a strong and resilient mind and body that will help us to age positively and with energy. There's nothing to say that you will experience a midlife crisis at all. However, this time of a life is a good chance to consider your life so far: Are you happy? What do you still want to achieve in life? What do you want to change? What do you want to keep the same?

This is the opportunity to be curious about yourself and your life. Midlife can be exciting. Gone are the days of having to prove yourself as the new person in a workplace, or give your energy to young children, or feel dragged in lots of different directions. You can start to focus on yourself and your needs, treasuring the relationships that matter and exploring new challenges. The old adage 'life begins at 50' is as true as you choose to make it. The second half of your life can be fulfilling, positive and joyful. ■



WHAT IS DRIVING *Cosmetic* SURGERY?

To want to look and feel your best is a natural human tendency, yet many people feel that cosmetic surgery will also boost their self-esteem and general happiness

WORDS CLAIRE CANTOR

We all like to feel happy about how we look – it makes us feel better about ourselves. More confident, more able, more accepted. Our beauty-biased (and youth-biased) society encourages us to seek ways to improve our appearance and wellbeing, and therein our happiness, and we have access to an overwhelming array of beauty and wellbeing products and services. The global cosmetic surgery and procedure market size was estimated at \$63.4 billion in 2021, and estimated figures for 2022 are expected to reach \$69.9 billion.

According to consultant psychiatrist Professor David Veale, co-author of *Overcoming Body Image Problems Including Body Dysmorphic Disorder*, the most common reason for requesting cosmetic surgery “is because someone feels ‘abnormal’”. Comparing their own features with

their idea of what a ‘normal’ feature should look like and deciding there is room for improvement. Usually it expresses a strong desire to fit in.”

Other reasons cited for getting cosmetic surgery are:

To boost self-esteem: when we believe we look good, we often feel good.

Health reasons: nose reconstruction (rhinoplasty) for breathing problems, breast reduction to reduce back pain, eyelid reduction (blepharoplasty) for better vision.

To look younger: life changes can motivate people to opt for plastic surgery in an attempt to hold back the ageing process.

For self-improvement: correcting a defect a person has had

since birth, or reconstruction following injury or surgery.

To look more like celebrities: or replicate the appearance of people we admire or esteem.

Professor Veale explains that most people who come to a cosmetic clinic talk in terms of improving their self-confidence and self-esteem. "They have the hope that this will enable them to achieve something that is currently missing in their lives. This is sometimes very simple - such as the ability to wear a swimsuit. But the impact may be more far reaching."

Other people's opinions can influence someone's decision to get cosmetic surgery if they place more value on their appearance than their sense of self.

Cosmetic surgeons counsel against getting cosmetic surgery in order to please someone else. Many of us have had comments made about our appearance that have lingered in our minds for years. Feeling that there is something wrong with the way we look due to comments from others may lead to unrealistic expectations of the outcome of the surgery. Indeed, the purported 'defect' may not even be noticeable to most other people, or exist at all, and a change in appearance may not produce the desired approval and acceptance being sought.

However, being specific about what exactly you want to change rather than vaguely wanting to 'look better', can be a good place to start talking about the potential benefit of plastic surgery.

There are very few long-term studies of people's satisfaction with their plastic surgery. Many people are initially satisfied, perhaps as they have invested so much in it, or for other psychological reasons. Professor Veale explains that these are often the people who come back for repeated procedures. On a constant quest to look and feel just right, the endless procedures become an addiction.

Body dysmorphic disorder (BDD) is an anxiety disorder linked to body image. People who suffer with BDD think obsessively about their perceived flaws or defects in their appearance - a flaw that may be imperceptible to others. Their negative feelings about themselves and the way they look limit their lives in many ways - socially, at work, and in relationships. It is thought that 10% of people with BDD seek cosmetic procedures to eliminate the flaw and therefore their anxiety.

"Cosmetic surgery does not usually solve the symptoms of body dysmorphic disorder in terms of the preoccupation, distress and disability in their life," says Professor Veale. "Alternatively, if they are satisfied with the



SOCIAL MEDIA AND BODY IMAGE

These days every teenager knows how to enhance their selfies - with filters and body/face-altering apps, we can all look like perfect models. Yet insufficient research means the impact of social media on body image is yet to be quantified. What we do know is that scrolling through photo-based images on Facebook and Instagram increases body dissatisfaction among users, but it is unclear whether people who use these social platforms are those already preoccupied with their appearance or if the usage causes the preoccupation. Research suggests that people are more impacted by images of celebrities and people they aspire to, rather than friends and family - they know the reality of the lives of friends and family whereas they imagine the perfect lives of celebrities. A step to mitigating the impact of social media use on body image is to curate the feed. Choose the sites to visit and remember that these are digitally enhanced images.

“COSMETIC SURGEONS COUNSEL AGAINST GETTING SURGERY TO PLEASE SOMEONE ELSE”

procedure then they are likely to become preoccupied with another area of their body.”

Studies show excessive exposure to images of cosmetic enhancements increases people's desire for surgery. In a study by Mental Health Foundation (mentalhealth.org.uk), four out of ten teenagers polled said images on social media caused them to worry about body image. BBC Future revealed that 'A systematic review of 20 papers published in 2016 found that photo-based activities, like scrolling through Instagram or posting pictures of yourself, were a particular problem when it came to negative thoughts about your body'.

There is also a strong argument to suggest that exposure to unrealistic body images through TV shows and magazines may

increase body dissatisfaction particularly, but not exclusively, among young women and girls. However, psychologists suggest that someone's vulnerability to body dissatisfaction depends on many things - including how much of a person's self-worth is tied up in body image.

The online community, Eating Disorder Hope (eatingdisorderhope.com), explains that BDD, cosmetic surgery and eating disorders are connected 'through a distorted body image and perceived flaws with one's body parts'. People struggling with BDD and eating disorders often seek out cosmetic surgery to 'solve' their problem. But it may even exacerbate their problem, in turn requiring further psychological support. ■



THE *Paranoia* PANDEMIC

Still wearing a mask everywhere? Panic at the first sign of sickness? You could be experiencing health anxiety as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak

WORDS JENNY ROWE

At the start of 2020, COVID-19 was an unknown, potentially fatal virus, and the idea we could pass it on to our loved ones was terrifying. “The pandemic provided a stark and daily reminder that our health is fragile,” says clinical psychologist Dr Julie Smith, author of *Why Has Nobody Told Me This Before?* (£16.99/\$21, Michael Joseph). “While for many that anxiety reduced as we learnt more about

the virus and people were vaccinated, for a significant number the fear continues.”

For a third* of us, this fear has grown beyond the virus, becoming an increased concern for general health. In some cases, this has culminated in health anxiety. People with this type of anxiety regularly worry about getting ill, and are preoccupied about having one or several serious health issues, such as cancer. “While consideration for your health

can help to enhance your life and longevity, living in fear of what hasn’t happened can start to destroy it,” says Dr Smith. Here’s what to look out for.

Spot the signs

If any of the following behaviours have lasted at least six months or are having a negative impact on your life, it’s likely you are affected by health anxiety and should talk to your doctor for support.

1. OBSESSIVELY SCANNING YOUR BODY FOR SYMPTOMS

You may find you become hypervigilant and worried about normal bodily sensations. This can lead to panic attacks and trouble sleeping.

2. CONSTANTLY SEEKING REASSURANCE

"Reassurance doesn't last very long and it makes the anxiety worse," says clinical psychologist Dr Albert Moukheiber, author of Your Brain is Playing Tricks on You (£9.99/\$12, Legend Press). "If you reassure yourself about something, you're telling your brain that it is actually dangerous, which only serves to reinforce the anxiety cycle."

3. PUTTING OFF HEALTH-RELATED ACTION

*"Those with health anxiety fall into two categories - either you make every effort to ensure that you stay healthy, or you delay visiting medical professionals and ignore persistent symptoms," says consultant psychologist at doctify.com, Dr Venetia Leonidaki**.*

4. AVOIDING ACTIVITIES YOU USED TO ENJOY

"If you are highly anxious, you might start to make decisions based on fear of a potential future illness. You might stop doing things that are meaningful and important to you just in case they make you unwell," says Dr Smith.

Are you guilty of 'doom scrolling'?

"Endlessly googling symptoms causes more anxiety because it enables you to find worst-case scenarios (however unlikely they may be) and to focus on them in detail," says Dr Smith. If you can't resist, try searching for evidence to the contrary of what you might be temporarily believing.

When it's safe to stop worrying

While COVID-19 restrictions have eased, many of us may still be quarantining the post or disinfecting the shopping. But is it finally time to stop? While the initial evidence*** that COVID-19 could survive on some surfaces for days was alarming, now the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in the US says that while possible, the risk of transmission via contaminated surfaces is low.

And while regular hand-washing makes sense when it comes to good hygiene, unless you're clinically vulnerable, it may be time to review some of the safety behaviours

you adopted at the height of the pandemic, particularly if they've increased over time.

"Talk to a trusted friend about whether your worries and actions are proportionate, or whether they are now hindering rather than helping your life," advises Dr Smith. Of course, a good hand hygiene regime remains as important as ever.

If you are still struggling to function in everyday life, consider therapy.

"Cognitive behavioural therapy can work very well for health anxiety," says Dr Moukheiber. "Sometimes just a couple of sessions is enough." Speak to your doctor or find a local therapist. ■

Regardless of whether you feel anxious about your health, it's important you discuss any unusual symptoms with your doctor or other relevant health professional.

“LIVING IN FEAR OF WHAT HASN'T HAPPENED CAN DESTROY YOUR LIFE”

HELP AT HOME

These techniques can help manage your anxiety and prevent feeding it further.

EXPUL UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS OF PERFECT HEALTH

"Coughs and colds have always been extremely common. It's impossible to avoid catching germs completely," says Dr Leonidaki. "If you try, you may end up missing out on experiences."

RELAX YOUR BODY

"Anxiety is not all in the mind, it's also mediated by the body. Disengaging your muscles, such as unclenching your jaw, can help to ease anxiety in the moment," says Dr Moukheiber.

PROCRASTINATE THE STRESS

"Build resilience by learning to delegate worries to your future self. Say 'I'll deal with it if it happens'," says Dr Moukheiber.

BE MORE SELF-RELIANT

"Try to put a cap on how many people you ask for reassurance and how many times you ask," says Dr Smith. "Get your second opinion, then practise trusting your own judgement."

EXPOSE YOURSELF TO YOUR FEARS GRADUALLY

"It's normal to experience increased stress when you do something that you haven't done for a while," says Dr Smith. "But trust that this won't last forever. The more you do something, such as going to crowded places, the easier it will become. Avoidance will just prolong your anxiety."



PANICKED?

Press Pause

*It's easier than you think to take back control
when you're having a panic attack*

WORDS ROSE GOODMAN

A pounding heart, crushing chest pain and debilitating terror may sound like the signs of a heart attack, but for those who suffer from panic attacks, these scary symptoms are all too common. Sound familiar? You're not alone - up to a third of people will experience at least one panic attack in their lifetime*, while others will have regular attacks or several in a short space of time.

Whatever your experience, there are ways to bring a panic attack under control. Here, our experts explain what could help...

What happens?

"A panic attack is an intense emotional and physical response to a sense of dread or fear," says psychologist Dr Alison McClymont. "It may have an obvious trigger (such as being under stress), but it may also come on seemingly unprovoked and can make you feel as if your health - or, in extreme situations, your life - is under threat."

Spot the signs

The overwhelming symptom of a panic attack is a sense of impending doom or anxiety. "This may be accompanied by difficulty breathing (hyperventilating), sweaty palms, a racing heart or muscle

pain," explains Dr McClymont. Trembling, dizziness and feeling detached from reality are also common symptoms.

The physical symptoms can be so extreme that some sufferers may go to A&E, believing they are having a heart »

SUPPORTING A LOVED ONE

If you're with someone who is experiencing a panic attack, it can be difficult to know how to help. But there are some simple ways you can help make them feel safe and at ease. "Don't touch them. Speak calmly and slowly, remind them where they are, that they are safe, and that you are there," says Dr McClymont. "Try modelling slow, calm breathing (in for four and out for eight), get them some water and keep reminding them that this will pass, and that breathing is the key."

5 WAYS TO PREVENT AN ATTACK

These daily habits can help to reduce future panic attacks, says the Mental Health Foundation:

- Practise better breathing (do the 4-7-8 breathing technique daily).
 - *Take regular exercise, such as walking or yoga. This will help to reduce stress and improve your mood.*
 - Eat frequent meals to stabilise blood-sugar levels.
 - *Avoid caffeine, alcohol and smoking.*
 - Try mindfulness to bring you back to the present moment.
- Download the Calm app (£7.99/\$14.99 per month, iOS and Android).

attack. However, while panic attacks are frightening, they're not dangerous and won't cause you physical harm.

Stay calm

If you feel a panic attack developing, try to think of it like a big wave. You cannot stop it, but you can ride it. "Distract yourself from catastrophic thoughts and don't buy into them," says Dr Paul McLaren, consultant psychiatrist for the Priory Group. There are also things you can do to take back a feeling of control.

JUST BREATHE

"Try to slow your breathing, even though you will feel that you need to breathe harder," says Dr McLaren. This 4-7-8 breathing exercise will help activate your parasympathetic nervous system, which is responsible for relaxation.

1. Close your mouth and inhale through your nose for a count of four.
2. Now hold your breath for a count of seven.
3. Exhale completely out of your mouth, making a 'whoosh' sound, for a count of eight.
4. Inhale again and repeat the cycle three more times, or more if needed.

GROUND YOURSELF

Try the 5,4,3,2,1 grounding technique, which will bring you

back to the present moment. This exercise requires you to engage all of your senses by naming:

Five things you can see.

Four things you feel, such as the texture of a chair or the temperature of the room you're in.

Three things you can hear.

Two things you can smell.

One thing you can taste. If you can't taste anything, name a taste you like.

NOTICE YOUR BODY

A body-scan exercise can release tension you're not even aware you're holding. Practising this technique regularly can help reduce anxiety, depression and fatigue. During a panic attack, doing this exercise can help to bring you back to your body and feel safe within it. Give it a go:

Sit or lie down in a comfortable spot and position.

Start with the breathing strategy described in the previous column and then focus on your toes.

Check in with what you can feel and how they feel. Give them a little wiggle.

Move on to the soles of your feet. Keep breathing slowly and gradually move up through your body, checking in, moving and relaxing each part as you go.

When you've completed this, gradually go back down your body in the same order whilst continuing your slow and steady breath style. This can be a really useful activity to help you de-stress and be more mindful and body aware.

IMAGINE A SAFE SPACE

Also known as visualisation, this technique requires you to imagine that you're in a calm, safe and soothing place. "Think about what you can see, hear, taste, smell and feel," says clinical psychologist Dr Marianne Trent, creator of The Feel Better Academy. "Know that you can revisit this place in your mind whenever you choose." Your safe space could be anywhere - from a tropical beach or your garden in the summer, to a relaxing bubble bath.

BE AWARE

Feeling stressed out? Integrative counsellor Katharina Wolf suggests using a technique called AWARE, which works to move your brain from a state of high anxiety to a place of calm, and helps to avoid creating further triggers.

Accept the anxiety/panic. Fighting it will only heighten it.

Watch and scale your panic/anxiety from one to ten (with ten being maximum panic/anxiety).

Act normally, while imagining yourself calm.

Repeat the above three steps.

Expect the best. Use positive statements such as, 'This can't harm me'; 'I can master this'; 'This will go away soon'.

Rest and recover

It's common to feel exhausted and emotional after suffering a panic attack. "Go to a calm and quiet place. Play some music and take time to comfort yourself and re-engage with your surroundings," advises Dr McClymont. "Drink water and, if you feel dizzy, try eating a small amount of sugar. The most important thing is to be still, breathe, and show yourself

compassion for the intense and frightening experience you have just endured”

Panic attack or anxiety attack?

While these terms are often used interchangeably, the symptoms of a panic attack and an anxiety attack do differ slightly. “An anxiety attack is usually not accompanied by such a sense of impending doom or death,” says Dr McClymont. “The physical symptoms are similar, but in a panic attack the threat response is more highly elevated and things such as hyperventilating or chest pain are more likely to occur.”

Stop the cycle

Talking therapies such as cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) are often used to treat panic attacks. “It is likely that panic developed for an important reason to protect you from something painful or difficult, says Dr Trent. “Working through these reasons and learning more about why you respond in the way you do can be incredibly useful, and enable you to enjoy your life more fully.”

“IT’S COMMON TO FEEL EXHAUSTED AND EMOTIONAL AFTER SUFFERING A PANIC ATTACK”

Is it panic disorder?

If you experience panic attacks, it doesn't necessarily mean that you have panic disorder. As Dr McClymont explains, panic disorder is classified as having at least one panic attack and subsequent fear or intrusive thoughts about having another, across one month.

If you're resorting to unhealthy coping mechanisms or ways of preventing an attack - for example, avoiding certain situations that have caused you anxiety in the past - you may be diagnosed with panic disorder. However, this can only be diagnosed by a professional and may require both medication and therapy to treat it, so visit your doctor if you are concerned. ■

‘I BEAT THE FEAR’



Dr Sophie Mort, clinical psychologist and the author of *A Manual For Being Human*** (£14.99/\$18.50, Simon & Schuster), shares her experience of overcoming panic attacks...

“I had my first panic attack aged 18, when I was on holiday. I kept telling myself I had sunstroke, which was why I overheated and my heart was racing. Then the next day it came back, over and over. I knew then that it wasn't the sun.

My panic attacks then escalated to the point where I didn't leave the house for nearly three months, as everything I did set them off. I quit university and didn't see friends.

I finally saw a therapist and she taught me techniques to manage the panic. After a month, I noticed that the attacks had lessened enough for me to leave the house. I haven't had a panic attack in years, and I manage my anxiety with yoga, mindfulness and breathing exercises.

My favourite technique is saying ‘bring it on’ whenever I feel the physical sensations of anxiety or panic building. That's been the most important part of my journey, because when I say it and really mean it, it removes the fear cycle that kept the panic alive.”



IMPROVE YOUR WELLBEING

WITH

Essential Oils

The right aroma can help ease anxiety, reduce stress and boost your mood

WORDS ROSE GOODMAN

Sleepless nights making you miserable? Stress affecting your daily life? You don't need to grin and bear it. From lighting a lavender-scented candle to steaming up your shower with invigorating orange, there's an essential oil to help a whole host of ailments. And there's more good news. You'll also transform your home into a blissful escape at the same time! Here, our experts help you get to grips with the very best of essential oils for your physical and mental health...



Peppermint

It's a fantastic stimulant. "Use it to help overcome tiredness and increase your creativity and focus," says feng shui consultant Alexandra Lees, from wuweiwisdom.com.

Peppermint oil can also boost exercise performance, breathing, blood pressure and heart rate, shows research published in the *Journal of the International Society of Sports Nutrition*. And that's not all. "You can use peppermint oil for treating coughs and colds, plus reducing pain



“THERE’S AN ESSENTIAL OIL TO HELP A HOST OF AILMENTS”

and stress,” says Dr Tim Bond, natural health expert from Pureessential.

Did you know? Sniffing peppermint before a workout can stimulate muscles so you perform better, while the scent of cinnamon can boost mental clarity, according to studies in Iran.

Lavender

Struggle to drift off at night? Inhaling lavender can help you to sleep better and wake up feeling refreshed, found research published in the *Journal of Alternative and Complementary*

Medicine. It can also help reduce anxiety. This is because it affects the body’s stress response, also known as fight-or-flight.

Inhaling lavender can help – fast. In fact, research* shows it can take just three minutes to be effective. Using it in a diffuser? Make sure you have it on for ten minutes to reap the benefits.



Bergamot

“Bergamot oil is often used topically for its soothing effect on skin and hair,” says Dr Bond. This is due to its refreshing and fruity scent, and its antibacterial and anti-inflammatory properties. Bergamot oil can also help with stress reduction**. Inhaling it has been found to reduce anxiety, depression and fatigue by signalling to the brain to release happy hormones, dopamine and serotonin. »

THE SCIENCE OF ESSENTIAL OILS

“Essential oils work on both physical and emotional levels,” says wellbeing practitioner Arwen Bardsley, from evenstarwellbeing.com.

“The hypothalamus gland in the brain is instantly triggered by the smell of essential oils, producing hormones that you need for sleep, relaxing, energy, thirst, mood, hunger and sex drive. These hormones act like chemical messengers and rush to specific parts of your body, ensuring your internal processes are kept balanced and working as they should.”





HOW TO USE

DIFFUSERS

You can add essential oils of your choice to these electric pods.

Simply remove the lid and fill the reservoir with water to the 'max' line, then add in the specified amount of oil drops. The diffuser will release scented mist into the air.

INHALE

Fill a bowl with hot water and add one to three drops of essential oil.

Place a towel over your head and the bowl. Close your eyes and deeply inhale the steam for several minutes.

This can be repeated a few times throughout the day.

For a quick stress-buster, massage one to two drops of bergamot oil mixed with carrier oil into your hands and inhale deeply through the nose and exhale slowly out through the mouth three times.



Ylang-ylang

Self-esteem in need of a boost?

The soothing, exotic, sweet scent of these delicate flowers is a very effective solution, say scientists whose work was published in the *Journal of the Nursing School of the University of Sao Paulo*. When comparing inhaling ylang-ylang to a placebo, results showed ylang-ylang boosted levels of self-reported confidence. This fruity scent can also help increase your libido. It's considered one of the biggest aphrodisiacs in Asia. Simply diffuse a few drops in your bedroom and let the magic happen.



Rose

If you're experiencing low mood, a drop of rose oil can give you the boost you need. This is because the sweet floral scent stimulates the release of the feel-good hormone, dopamine.*** To make your own room fragrance, put a few drops of oil along with water into a spritz bottle. Or, to target low mood and anxiety specifically, mix with lavender oil in a diffuser.



Geranium

Hormones wreaking havoc with your mood? Inhaling geranium could be the answer. Acting as a tonic for the adrenal cortex which regulates the release of hormones, this oil helps with menopause and menstrual irregularities. In menopause, geranium oil is helpful for reducing hot flushes, and pain, research reveals.**** As hormones have a direct affect on our moods, geranium can help beat low mood, nervousness and fatigue.



Orange

"Orange essential oil can help lift mood or reduce stress," says Dr Bond. It can also help to reduce anxiety and pain, says a study published in the *Journal*

of *Alternative and Complementary Medicine*. Participants inhaled orange essential oil on admission to an emergency ward with a limb fracture. For those inhaling the oil, their level of pain and anxiety was significantly less than for those receiving no oil.



Neroli

Want to appear slimmer?

Try neroli. Men estimated a woman wearing a floral smell - such as this aroma from the flowers of bitter orange blossom trees - to be 12lb lighter than she really was, in one American study. It's an uplifting fragrance that helps nourish your skin - so it's got to be worth a try!

Want to feel...

Sexy? Try a floral blend of rose and jasmine with patchouli.

Comforted? Go for iris - it's warm, powdery and cocooning.

Happy? Pick sweetly perfumed caramel and vanilla flowers, such as orchard or frangipani.

If you have a skin condition, consult your dermatologist before using essential oils topically. ■

NATURAL ISN'T ALWAYS SAFEST

"After the few years we've just had, taking care of mental wellbeing has been reprioritised for a lot of people and essential oils are an accessible way to support that," says Jennie Pinkhart, clinical aromatherapist and founder of Eve & Keel. "Remember that just because they are natural, it doesn't mean they are always safe. If you are unsure where to start, you can buy pre-made blends or contact a qualified aromatherapist to create something bespoke." With increased demand, we are likely to see a growth in unsustainable harvesting practices. "If you are buying neat oils, always buy from a trusted supplier and choose certified organic when possible."

REMEMBER

- Always dilute your essential oils with a carrier oil, and carry out a patch test before using topically.
- **Dropping into your bath? Be sure to use a dispersing agent, such as Castile Liquid Soap Base.**
- Do not inhale for longer than 15-20 minutes. If using a diffuser, follow the rule of 30-60 minutes on and 30-60 minutes off.
 - **Never ingest or use in your eyes or ears.**

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THE Pollyanna PROBLEM



Looking too much on the bright side of life can have a decidedly poor outlook for your mental health...

WORDS SARAH WHITELEY

Be positive! It's a phrase that has become a mantra to so many people in recent years - something everyone is striving for. After all, who doesn't want to see their glass as half full, the silver linings around the rain clouds and the good in every situation?

But, like Pollyanna in the novel, could being blindly optimistic lead to disappointment?

TOXIC POSITIVITY SAYINGS

- 'Chin up'
- 'Everything will be OK'
- 'Don't worry, be happy!'
- 'Always look on the bright side'
- 'Everything happens for a reason!'
- 'It could be worse'
- 'At least...'

Is always looking on the bright side better for us? Or can there be too much of a good thing? Are we all too busy telling ourselves - and each other - to keep our chin up and look for the rainbows in life, to actually acknowledge how we're really feeling and even deal with those feelings effectively?

In some cases, too much positivity can be bad for us. Read on to find out when it's OK to feel unhappy..

Turning toxic

Being positive is usually seen as an important thing, isn't it? In a modern world that is becoming increasingly aware of mental health and its importance to our overall wellbeing, we are more conscious of our feelings than ever - and how important it is to feel 'good'. Maybe this explains the relatively recent focus - particularly on social media - on 'being positive'.

Of course, being positive isn't a bad thing - if it's genuine. If it's not genuine, and is being forced, that's where the problem comes in.

Plain old positivity tips into toxic positivity when you start denying your real emotions, trying to convince yourself that you're »



“IF BEING POSITIVE IS NOT GENUINE, AND IS BEING FORCED, THAT’S WHERE THE PROBLEM COMES IN”



feeling something you aren't and becoming fixated on a state of mind that isn't real.

"We have to remember that, as humans, we're meant to feel a huge range of emotions," says coach and mentor Gitanjali Trevorrow-Seymour, founder of the people development company High Definition You. "Sadness as well as joy, disappointment and jealousy, as well as elation and gratitude. None of these emotions is meant to be constant, it's natural for them to change - even if you do have a naturally bright outlook, you can still feel grief and gloom, desolation and despondency.

"Even when you think about the phrase 'toxic positivity', it suggests an idea of overdosing on something, having too much of it in your body. This then leads to the idea of 'detoxing' and removing it completely - which, when we're talking about positivity, doesn't make sense. Like so many things in life, it's all about balance."

Dangers to yourself...

"Toxic positivity comes from the innocent misunderstanding that some of our feelings are 'good', like happiness and joy, while others are 'bad', such as sadness and unhappiness,"

explains Gitanjali. "And, obviously, we want more of the good. But when we label our feelings in such a way - good and bad, positive and negative - we run the danger of falsely chasing some and desperately avoiding the other. Neither are better or worse when we understand how our minds work. When we understand that feelings come from one place only - our own thinking."

So, if you find yourself standing in front of the mirror, repeating to yourself, 'Be positive, be positive', by focusing on that and telling ourselves to feel a single emotion, we can end up suppressing and masking our real feelings. Such suppression places extra stress on the body, which can eventually lead to depression, anxiety and even physical illness.

It not only leads to guilt when we, quite naturally, experience a 'negative' emotion or feel like a failure when we haven't managed to remain 'positive' all day, but we also end up denying ourselves the true human experience that is feeling happiness and sadness and everything in between.

"Every single one of our coaching clients notices one thing very quickly - how much time they're spending stuck in what we refer to as their 'BMW' (b***ing, moaning and whining). Of course, no-one wants to be stuck in that BMW, so we go to the other extreme, where we only show people our 'happy' selves and act a certain way in front of

POSITIVE VIBES

A survey by Science of People found that 53% of people experience toxic positivity one to three times a week.

them. And that isn't authentic and, ironically, doesn't feel very good," says Gitanjali.

"It robs us of a deeper connection with those around us. We don't get to experience that situation where we ask someone twice, 'How are you?' in order to get a real answer. There's a real shallowness to that kind of positivity."

By focusing on positivity too much, we fear the other 'bad' emotions and get stuck in them. But, as humans, we get to understand how our minds work. We get to understand that 100% of our feelings come from 100% our thinking. And, as Gitanjali says, "I wish someone had told me this decades ago - that a feeling lasts only as long as thought."

Sadness, anger, grief and all of the other 'negative' emotions are things to be experienced, not 'fixed'. And only once we have accepted ourselves - and all of our emotions - can we have truly robust mental health.

Helping others

Imagine someone tells you they're going through a hard time. Maybe they've left a job, broken up with a partner, or have had to move out of their dream house. They pour their heart out to you - and your response? "Try to be positive!"

"People obviously do this with good intentions, trying to make that person feel better or find a solution, but you have to think about it from the receiving end. They aren't going to be enriched by that experience or feel better for it," says Gitanjali.

"No, you're effectively brushing them off and dismissing their feelings. As a consequence, they may end up feeling as if they cannot be their true self or be able to speak up, not unless it's about something positive. They'll feel forced to put a brave face on and suppress their real experiences and emotions, which is fatiguing."

When it comes to children, we equally shouldn't try to deny or distract them from their 'negative' feelings. We've all seen the situation where grandparents put the TV



on or hand them a bar of chocolate to distract them from their parents leaving, but Gitanjali argues that isn't good for them.

"It's a totally valid reaction for them to miss their parents and to try to distract them from their feelings means they'll learn to look outside themselves to make themselves feel better in the future, rather than to process their emotions on their own."

The benefits of feeling 'bad'

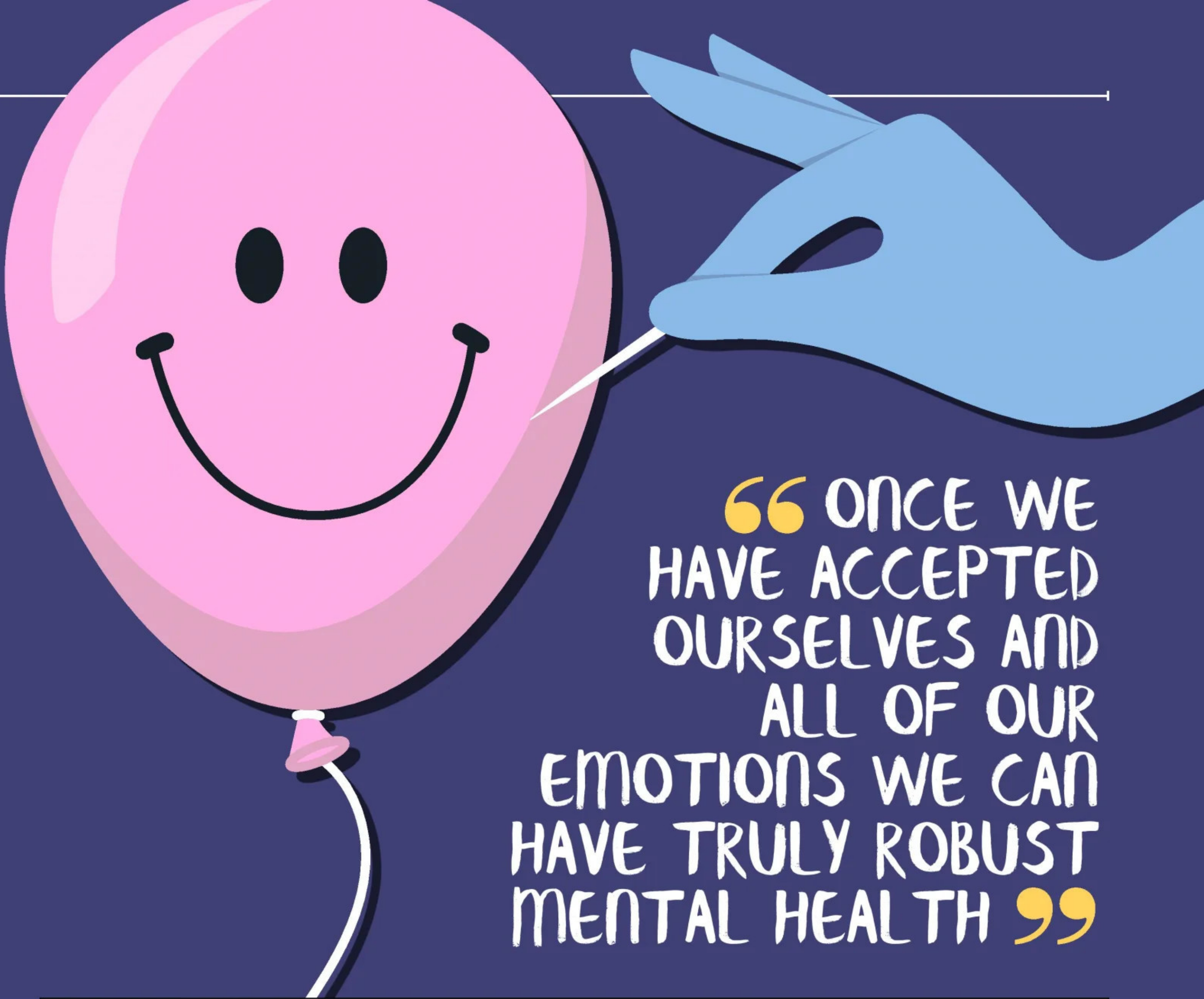
If you've seen the Pixar movie *Inside Out* you might recall a scene where Bing Bong, the main character Riley's imaginary friend, is devastated that his rocket has been cleared away, signalling that Riley no longer needs him. Joy, the 'positive', lead emotion, tries offering him solutions and distracting him from his upset, yet it makes no difference to Bing Bong's clear pain. Sadness, the 'negative' emotion, on the other hand, sits down with him and acknowledges what he has been through and what he is feeling. All the while Joy chastises her, worrying that Sadness is only making Bing Bong feel worse. But, by acknowledging his upset, Sadness allows Bing Bong to cry and express his emotions. After a second or two, he says, 'I feel better now' and literally picks himself back up.

"It's such a powerful scene, I use it in so many of my training sessions," says Gitanjali. "It shows, really simply, how important it is to express your thoughts and feel the emotion - and to allow others to do the same. We're all designed to 'float' back to our default state of clarity and calmness, but, to do this, we need to recognise our feelings in order to be able to move on from them."

Like Joy, we can all be afraid when someone is upset - afraid of making them feel worse, of being negative, of saying the wrong thing entirely. But, usually, just being there for them, rather than attempting to 'fix' their problem or 'make' them happy again, can be enough.

Should we avoid affirmations?

Many people use the phrase 'be positive' and other similar sayings as affirmations, something to say to themselves every day to help them reprogramme their minds to capture empowering beliefs, habits and thought patterns. Does Gitanjali think we should give them up? "No, not all - I use affirmations myself and they can be a really useful tool for many people if they're used correctly," he says. "Next time you do yours, just ensure you take note of what you are saying and how it makes you feel when you say it. It should feel grounded and as if it has depth. If, when you repeat it to yourself, it feels shallow and as if you're trying to convince yourself of something, then pause, and take note of that." ■



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OTHER THINGS TO 'BE'

So if we aren't going to 'be positive', what else does Gitanjali suggest we should 'be'?

BE PRESENT

Don't focus on the past and what has already been, as that can lead to depression. Similarly, if you turn your attention to the future, it is too easy to get swept up in worries or anxiety. By staying present, we can allay a lot of these feelings.

BE COURAGEOUS

Accept that we can't predict even our next thought, let alone the future! Be brave to stay with the discomfort and instead of seeking refuge in positivity, look with courage for the possibilities.

BE CURIOUS

Stay with your true emotions, rather than trying to convince yourself you're feeling something else, and see how long they last and develop. Remember, they will not remain forever.

BE COMPASSIONATE

While many of us show compassion to other people, we need to extend this same kindness to ourselves. Allow yourself to feel your emotions truly and not feel guilty about what they are.

WHAT IT MEANS TO BE *Self-conscious*

If you find yourself worrying about what others might think about the way you act, dress or speak, you could be overly self-conscious. We explore what this means

WORDS JULIE BASSETT

We're all self-conscious to a lesser or greater extent, just as we're all conscious of the people around us and the environment we're in. To be self-conscious is to be overly aware of yourself and the image you present to the outside world. This might only manifest in particular situations, such as giving a presentation in front of a large group of people or walking into a party alone. You might perceive that people are looking at you, and wonder what they're thinking about you from the way you dress, talk or walk. But then the feeling passes as you gain confidence in the situation. For many people, however, this feeling doesn't pass easily, and can cause a preoccupation with their self that leads to low self-esteem and social anxiety. This can then impact mental health and wellbeing.

SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS VERSUS SELF-AWARENESS

Self-consciousness and self-awareness are often used interchangeably, but it's important to understand the difference. Being overly self-conscious can be all-consuming and greatly impact on your life. However, it's a good thing to be self-aware, as this can help you to understand who you are as a person, which in turn can make you feel more comfortable in your own skin and of the image you project to the world. The key difference with self-awareness is that it's about embracing yourself without judgement, simply accepting yourself, with all your strengths and weaknesses, as you are at any given moment in time. It's about living in the moment you're in and acknowledging all your feelings. Self-consciousness, however, is when you begin to judge yourself against a standard you have set, and it's this judgement that can lead to the negative impact that being unhelpfully self-conscious can bring about. You can use your self-awareness to bring your self-consciousness in check, leading to a good balance between the two.

“ IF WE FEEL OVERLY AWARE OF OURSELF, IT BECOMES HARDER TO GO OUT IN SOCIAL SITUATIONS ”

Do you feel that you spend a lot of time worrying about how you come across to other people? This might be in terms of your behaviours and the way you act around people, or your appearance and clothing. Being overly self-conscious can bring about lots of different emotions and feelings. We may have a perception of how we want others to view us - successful, for example, or stylish - and how well we meet these expectations will impact on the emotions we experience as a result. For example, if you want to come across as being good at your job, then a promotion at work can trigger feelings of pride. However, if you don't deliver a piece of work on time and are reprimanded, you might feel ashamed, guilty or embarrassed, as well as worried about how other people will view your 'failure'.

There are benefits to being self-conscious. It can help us to become more aware of our strengths and weakness, and build up good self-awareness (see the box above for more). That pride we feel when doing something that meets our own expectations of ourself can be a driver to work hard. If we feel embarrassed after making a mistake,

we might be more likely to own up to it and work hard to correct it. These self-conscious emotions can work to our advantage. It's also good to have some understanding of how we come across to other people. When you go for a job interview, for example, you present the best version of yourself in the hope of impressing the interviewing panel. A healthy level of self-consciousness can be a positive thing.

However, being too self-conscious can cause problems. If we start to feel overly aware of ourselves and the way we look, then it becomes harder to go out into social situations. We may begin to feel anxious about choosing the right clothing, driving the right car, living in the right area. It can feel impossible to live up to this imagined persona that we want to project out into the world. Another problem is that we might start making life choices based on what we feel we 'should' do rather than what we want to do. We might be so preoccupied with how we come across to others, that we don't always make choices that align with our personal beliefs or values.

When it comes to overcoming undue self-consciousness, part of the journey is about

living more authentically and becoming comfortable with who you are. This can take time, building resilience, self-trust and a good awareness of yourself and who you want to be. As we've said, being self-conscious can help you to be more aware of your strengths, so try to build some daily mantras around these to remind yourself of your positive attributes. When more negative thoughts or worries intrude, it can help to take a moment to question those thoughts - become mindful of these intrusions, and try to reframe them in a positive way. For example, if you're worried about your outfit at a social gathering not being right, gently remind yourself that you picked it because you liked it and it suits you, and what other people might think doesn't matter as long as you're happy.

It's also important to realise that more often than not, your worries are completely unfounded. Other people aren't having those thoughts you think they are. People don't see the same flaws that we perceive ourselves to have or judge us as much as we judge ourselves. Sometimes it helps in a situation to remember that it's our mind creating scenarios around how other people feel and think about us, and that's not the same as reality. Often our self-consciousness stems from comparing ourselves to others and feeling like we don't live up to them, so it's important to take time to value what you have in your own life - practising gratitude daily can be a useful skill here.

While most of us will experience a degree of self-consciousness, there are some of us who lack this sense. This can sometimes mean that we present ourselves in a more negative way to other people, and not show who we really are. If we don't consider at all how we come across in a social environment, we may act in a way that is considered rude or uncaring. We might not take feedback from others very well and feel defensive, because we're unaware of how we're presenting ourselves so it feels like an unwarranted attack. It can be difficult to learn how to develop a greater awareness of self, but start small. Stop and consider thoughts, feelings and actions more often. Listen to the people around you and what they are saying. For example, someone might say to you that you always seem to be in a bad mood - you might feel to yourself that you're not, but it raises the question of why you are coming across that way. Building a little self-awareness and self-consciousness can help to improve your social skills, empathy and relationships.

Gaining an understanding of how self-conscious you are, or not, is a good starting point. A little awareness goes a long way towards building a healthy and manageable level of self-consciousness that enhances your life, without letting negative self-talk prevent you from being you. ■

Trauma

IS IT THE REASON BEHIND THAT PAIN?

From migraines to digestive issues, discomfort could be the result of difficult life experiences

WORDS ROSE GOODMAN

Constantly complaining of pain without any obvious cause? Revisiting your doctor and not getting the answers you want? Difficult life experiences might be to blame. That's right, while we often think of pain as only having a physical cause, studies* show that health problems, such as migraines or digestive issues, might actually be the result of unprocessed difficult life experiences, which have become 'trapped' in the body. Essentially, it's the result of never dealing with trauma when it originally happened, and your body is now bearing the brunt.

We've asked our experts for the lowdown on trauma, how you can release it at home, and when to seek professional help.

What is trauma?

It is an emotional and physiological response to a distressing event. "When this response causes extreme symptoms, such

as flashbacks, it's defined as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)," says Dr Elena Touroni, clinical psychologist and co-founder of The Chelsea Psychology Clinic. However, you don't need an official diagnosis of PTSD to be having a 'trauma response'.

Any number of events can be considered traumatic if our bodies felt under threat at the time, which means it's different for everyone. Common sources include ongoing distress, such as long-term illness or abusive relationship, while one-off traumatic events include suddenly losing

someone close to you, being involved in a road accident and childbirth.

However, trauma doesn't have to be a 'serious' event. Rather, it's about how your parasympathetic nervous system (PNS), which is responsible for the 'fight or flight' stress response, responds, and the feelings you have at the time - this includes fear, anxiety and shame.

How the body remembers

It all comes back to the vagus nerve, which is the main nerves of your PNS, says »

“HEALTH PROBLEMS MIGHT BE THE RESULT OF UNPROCESSED DIFFICULT LIFE EXPERIENCES, WHICH HAVE BECOME 'TRAPPED'”



AT HOME SOLUTIONS

Try these easy-to-do techniques to help release emotions trapped in your body and ease pain.

YOGA

“Yoga is an effective way to release tension in the body, which in turn helps to unlock stored emotions,” says yoga teacher Sarah Highfield (yogagise.com). “Yoga helps by relaxing both the mind and body, and promoting an overall sense of wellbeing.” Try the eagle arms pose. It will help to release tension by expanding the back muscles, which are connected to the shoulders.

- Start in a comfortable seated or kneeling position.
- *Extend both of your arms out to the sides, then bring them together and cross your left arm over your right at the elbows, placing your palms as close together as possible.*
- Try to keep your spine long, and soften your shoulders down and away from your ears, as you gently lift your elbows up.
- *Hold this for eight deep breaths in and out of your nose. Then repeat on the second side.*



“ FOCUSING ON YOUR BREATHING IS AN EASY BUT EFFECTIVE WAY TO CALM YOUR NERVOUS SYSTEM ”

trauma-focused therapist Dr Alison McClymont***. “During the fight-or-flight response, it floods the body with adrenaline, and sends messages to our cardio-respiratory system to get the heart pumping and the blood racing to prepare the body to run or fight, to escape danger,” she says.

In a non-threatening situation, the brain and body will reduce this response, bringing the PNS back to its normal functioning. However, after trauma, the PNS remains activated, continuously releasing the stress hormone cortisol into the bloodstream, keeping both the mind and the body on high alert for more danger. The result? Constant stress in the body, leading to tension, aches and pains. “I often see clients with migraines, back pain and fibromyalgia – where people experience extreme tiredness and pain all over the body,” says Dr Marianne Trent, clinical psychologist and creator of the Feel Better Academy.

Breathe

Focusing on your breathing is an easy but effective way to calm your nervous system and regain balance within your body. “It helps to improve heart rate variability and improve your window of tolerance – the state in which we’re able to remain grounded and present in the moment while processing any complicated feelings,” says Dr Trent.

Try box breathing to reduce your heart rate, and help your body and mind relax. It can help to picture a box in your mind’s eye as you practise this technique:

*Inhale through the nose
for a count of four.*

Hold the breath for a count of four.

*Exhale through the nose
for a count of four.*

Hold breath for a count of four.

Repeat four rounds.

Get mindful

"Practising mindfulness can help us to update our schemas," says Dr Trent. These are our thought patterns that help us understand the world around us. "By updating them, we can learn in all parts of our mind and body that the traumatic experience is not happening now," she adds. For example, 'I can smell the roses, I can feel the warm air on my skin, but I know that the trauma I'm stuck thinking about happened in winter'.

Try this mindfulness meditation to tune in to the present moment and release physical tension that you might not know you're holding:

Sit upright and just listen.

If your mind wanders, tune into any sounds around you.

Feel fear move through your veins towards your hands and feet, and visualise it falling away.

Shake your hands and feet, then relax into your seat. Take a few moments to appreciate your renewed calmness.

Create a journaling ritual

Simple but effective, journaling each day can help you to process feelings, recognise triggers, and offload difficult thoughts and feelings in a safe and contained way.

A study by Duke University also found that people who had experienced a traumatic life event and underwent a six-week journal-writing programme reported reduced stress and improved resilience. Here's how to give it a go:

Find what works for you. It doesn't necessarily have to mean putting pen to paper. If you enjoy writing on your laptop, do that. Or if you prefer to journal on the go, even the notes app on your phone will work.

Let go of expectations. There's no right or wrong way to journal. It's for your eyes only, so write whatever comes to mind.

Create a routine. Even if it's just 15 minutes in the morning or before bed, sticking to the same time each day will help transform journaling into a habit. ■

If you're experiencing health issues, see your doctor or medical professional. If you think it could be trauma, discuss this during your appointment. They can refer you for talking therapies if this might be the case.



WHEN THERAPY MIGHT HELP

Sometimes professional help can be the best course of action for dealing with unprocessed trauma. If any of these apply to you, it might be worth considering:

- You're experiencing flashbacks
- You're having nightmares
- Your thoughts about the event are affecting your quality of life
- You're unable to function (work, sleep, socialise) because of your thoughts
- You're experiencing repetitive and distressing images or sensations
- You have physical sensations, including aches and pains, sweating, nausea and trembling

It's especially important to seek professional support if you're experiencing flashbacks. "They are the brain's way of saying, 'We haven't dealt with this,'" says Dr McClymont. One of the most effective methods a therapist might use to treat trauma is called eye movement desensitisation and reprocessing (EMDR). "It encourages the body into the same state as one experiences during REM (deep) sleep and helps the sufferer put the memory effectively back into the long-term memory," she adds. Worried about facing painful feelings? It's understandable to feel scared of emotions related to trauma, but talking about it can help unlock them and enable you to move forward. Just remember to pace yourself. "Healing is not an overnight task and going too fast can sometimes make things worse," says Dr Tent. "It takes work, so make sure you're prioritising self-care. Do things you enjoy, eat a healthy diet and get plenty of sleep."

THE Healing POWER OF THINKING OF OTHERS

Self-care is usually thought of as doing things to help ourselves. But turning our attention towards helping others also benefits our mental and physical health

WORDS KATE ORSON

The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others." This quote by Mahatma Gandhi is an important point to consider. When we think of emotional wellbeing, the tendency is to focus on ourselves; practising self-care, focusing on the things that bring us joy and happiness. While there's much truth in the old adage of putting on our own oxygen

mask first, there are actually many benefits in turning our attention towards others.

The 'helper's high,' has been a phenomenon recognised since the 1980s. When we help others, we feel good. A 2013 metanalysis of 40 studies found that volunteering lowered depression and improved life satisfaction and wellbeing. Another study of people volunteering at a local foodbank found they felt less lonely

and isolated. One study in the US found that volunteers were also more likely than average to report having a sense of purpose and feeling calm and peaceful most of the time.

It's not just our emotional health that benefits from helping others, but our physical health too. A study from Carnegie Mellon University found that volunteering for at least 200 hours per year decreased the risk of high blood pressure by 40%. A greater



sense of purpose has been linked to lower risk of heart attack and dying from any cause, so it's clear that the emotional and physical benefits of helping are interlinked.

While the thought of adding volunteering to your to-do list might seem a bit overwhelming in times of emotional struggle, could it actually be the key to healing? Mel Riley is a therapist who herself has seen the benefits of helping others in her own life. She has dealt with depression and says, "I've been suicidal, but because I've been someone else's therapist, I've literally parked my own stuff to keep someone else alive." Riley observes that, "We don't talk enough about how avoidance can be a useful, helpful strategy, when we are flooded with overwhelming emotion. Time off from our own issues is okay."

How do you know when the time is right to turn attention away from yourself towards others? Riley says that, "They can go alongside each other; it doesn't have to be one or the other." We can engage in self-care, while also seeking opportunities to volunteer or be of assistance to others in some way.

What are you passionate about and what do you enjoy doing? Where do your skills lie? Are you an animal lover or dedicated to saving the environment? Are you a people person, or do you prefer to stay behind the scenes? Volunteering can be a way to explore your own passions and interests or discover something you've never known about yourself.

Explore what's going on in your local area. Check out local community organisations, non-profits, charities and churches. Maybe there's a foodbank, or an animal or homeless shelter.

Many of the benefits that come from volunteering are associated with social connections, spending time with others and building relationships. However, if in-person volunteering is impossible, there are many opportunities online. For

example, volunteer counselling, writing, researching, design, or admin for charities.

Helping others doesn't have to be a formal arrangement. It could just involve looking at your community and seeing how you could help. Maybe it's befriending an elderly person for a walk or cups of tea, or cooking a meal for a neighbour. There may be opportunities to lend a helping hand in online communities. Perhaps you have expertise in an area like healthy eating or organic gardening. Answering questions in support groups can be a way to easily assist others.

Volunteering is considered to be a selfless act, but the emotional and physical health benefits show it's one of mutual reciprocity. Riley recommends looking at what we are gaining from acts of kindness, to make sure it's a good fit. She says to ask yourself: 'Am I getting something out of this?' For example, maybe you're making new friendships, having a sense of belonging, or getting a sense of structure and purpose that helps your life. It shouldn't feel like a chore or drudgery or just another heavy responsibility.

How much time do you have available? It doesn't have to be a huge amount. In fact, a study published in *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* in 2020 found that two hours a week was the optimal amount to experience mental health benefits.

Volunteering isn't right for everyone, and if you're processing your own emotional difficulties, what you need can change from moment to moment. So what are some signs you're taking on too much? Riley says, "If you are bursting into tears frequently or flipping into rage. Some signs of burnout can be feeling overwhelmed or hopeless."

Riley stresses the importance of listening to our bodies. "You have to go with what you feel - can you do it? It can be hard when people have shame or a narrative around letting people down. It's okay to cancel if you're struggling." ■

MINI MOMENTS OF CARE

Microvolunteering is defined as doing very small tasks. This means you can volunteer quickly and conveniently without any long-term commitment. It could be something online, such as designing a logo, retweeting a message, signing a petition or writing a Facebook post. The ease of technology means people can experience the 'helper's high' without any advance planning.

One app, Be My Eyes, enables blind and low-vision users around the world to be connected to sighted volunteers via live video for anything they might need help with. For example, perhaps a blind person wants to cook a meal but can't tell which of their tins is the tomatoes. A quick video call can link them up with a volunteer who can assist them.

Microvolunteering can also take place offline, with tasks such as shopping for a neighbour, taking part in a flash mob, or planting a tree. You can find microvolunteering opportunities on volunteer websites, or in your local area. Microvolunteering could also be something you spontaneously decide to do for yourself. For example, picking up litter on a beach.

WEBSITES FOR FINDING VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES

volunteermatch.com

justserve.org

skillsforchange.com

doit.life

bemeyes.com



THE INTROVERT'S *GUIDE TO* *Speaking* *OUT*

*When you talk, does no
one listen? Here's how you
can have your say*



WORDS ALI HORSFALL

If you don't speak up, or don't feel listened to, you may start to feel that your opinion is unimportant, and your confidence will suffer. Whether it's in a heated political debate within the family or volunteering for a public-speaking event that could benefit your career, you may be less willing to pipe up in the future.

But it's not easy. Sometimes it's hard to get a word in edgeways, especially if you're an introvert and have a tendency to find certain social interactions uncomfortable and therefore stay silent. (Take our test, Life of the Party Escape Artist, and find out if this is you.)

To amplify your voice and communicate effectively, how you say something is often more important than what you're saying. So, try our tips to harness your voice when you need to be heard.

1 WARM UP YOUR VOCAL CHORDS

"Your voice is created largely by skeletal muscle, the same muscle you work in the gym," says Jessica Doyle, vocal coach, professor and researcher of voice and brain science.

"For peak performance it needs to be warmed up. Semi-Occluded Vocal Tract Exercises (SOVTE) are the way to do this. These vocal exercises are perfect for that froggy 'morning voice', or when you're feeling under the weather, but still need to sound clear and confident."

DO IT One of the most effective SOVTEs is humming through a straw for two to three minutes, says Jessica. Put one in your mouth and hum. Try sirens (hum slowly from the bottom of your vocal range to the top and back) or hills (smaller sirens that build, like an engine revving).

2 SORT OUT YOUR POSTURE

"Posture affects the sound of your voice," says Jessica, "and if your head is too far forward or too far back, your voice will have an abrasive quality."

Sitting at a desk for too long, carrying a heavy bag or walking in heels shifts the body's centre of gravity, so it's out of alignment and this can happen.

DO IT From a standing position, hang forward like a rag doll. As you inhale, roll back up slowly and exhale. Repeat this movement and when you're in the standing position, ensure that your head is balanced on top of the spine, and your shoulders are down and centred under your ears, rather than rounded forward or overextended to the back. »

LIFE OF THE PARTY OR ESCAPE ARTIST?

Extraverts tend to feel energised when they are around other people - they're generally more sociable, talkative and outgoing. Introverts are quieter, more reserved and often feel the need to recharge alone after being around lots of people. So where do you lie on the scale?

You're busy at work but a colleague is being overly chatty. Do you listen and nod politely, waiting for them to finish rather than interrupt them?

☐ YES ☐ NO

You've been in the dentist's waiting room for 40 minutes. Do you continue to wait patiently, even if it's making you late for work?

☐ YES ☐ NO

A colleague is complaining aloud about a report you wrote. Do you let them talk, avoiding public confrontation?

☐ YES ☐ NO

You tell a joke at work, but no one laughs. Rather than trying to explain it, do you simply pretend that it didn't happen?

☐ YES ☐ NO

At a party, you have no idea what someone is talking about. Do you smile and nod along, feigning knowledge rather than owning up and asking for an explanation?

☐ YES ☐ NO

HOW DID YOU SCORE?

If you answered 'yes' more times than 'no', you're likely to be an introvert.

“TO COMMUNICATE EFFECTIVELY, HOW YOU SAY SOMETHING IS OFTEN MORE IMPORTANT THAN WHAT YOU'RE SAYING”



3 TRAIN YOUR BODY

Get into the habit of practising confident body language, so even when you're feeling the pressure, you still give off an air of assurance.

DO IT Good eye contact makes you appear calm and comfortable. You don't need to maintain it all the time - use it to emphasise important points. If you are someone who fidgets when they are anxious or nervous, try to minimise this. A tapping pen or bouncing knee might distract from what you're trying to say.

Also, avoid negative body language like crossing your arms or putting your hands in your pockets. Try the power poses on the next page to get you in the right frame of mind.

4 USE BREATH CONTROL

Your breath can both relax your body and energise your voice. "A lack of breath control can show up in the voice as a gasp for air while speaking, a lack of volume and increased anxiety," says Jessica.

DO IT The key to a full breath is expansion. "Every body expands differently, but the three main places of expansion are the chest, abdomen and pelvic floor," explains Jessica.

Take a few deep breaths, and think of your body 'filling up' with air rather than 'breathing in'. Notice where your body naturally expands and practise filling that space while you are speaking.

5 PRACTISE SELF-CARE

Getting seven to nine hours of sleep each night, staying hydrated and eating a balanced diet all ensure that your brain, body and voice are ready to do their best work. These basic tenets of self-care may sound simple, but they are often the first things to go out of the window when we're busy.

DO IT It takes about four hours for the water you drink to hydrate your voice. A dehydrated voice sounds scratchy, feels uncomfortable and tires out more quickly.

"We lose up to 2lb of water while sleeping, so if you have a morning meeting, be sure there's a glass of water ready to go when you wake up," advises Jessica.

6 DO YOUR PREP

If you have an important point to make at a meeting, or just want a serious discussion with a friend, prepare for what might happen: you might hit traffic and be late; the difficult conversation may take an unexpected turn; or you could be interrupted.

DO IT To prepare, recreate these scenarios. Walk around your home quickly for five minutes (as if you are late or can't find the correct room), then present your piece. Or practise in front of a friend and have them interrupt you to ask a question or 'answer' a phone call. When you are prepared for interruptions, they're less likely to throw you off course.

7 DEVELOP YOUR FOCUS

Women tend to think of themselves as great multitaskers, but the reality is our brains are not. Trying to focus on more than one thing at a time inhibits the brain from performing to its potential, making each task longer and more difficult to achieve. So, be present while you're practising, just as you'll be in the moment.

DO IT "A dedicated 10 or 15 minutes of present practice every day in the week leading up to your event or conversation is far better than a single marathon practice session full of interruptions," suggests Jessica.

“IT TAKES ABOUT FOUR HOURS FOR THE WATER YOU DRINK TO HYDRATE YOUR VOICE”

STRIKE A POWER POSE

Try these simple high-power body poses before an important meeting or conversation to give you confidence.

VICTORY POSE

It's what champions do at the finish line and you'll see performers in this position as they lap up their applause on stage. To get into the victory pose, raise your arms into a giant V and hold your head high. Being in this pose for just two minutes will immediately increase your energy and boost your confidence.

TRY IT... when you have a moment alone before an important event.



THE BOSS

Placing your hands behind your head, with elbows flared out, opens up the body and gives off an air of relaxed authority and carefree confidence. You can use this stance just as effectively when seated.

TRY IT... when you want to look in control, take a risk or pitch an idea.



THE SUPER STANCE

Standing face forward with your feet planted wide apart gives the body a strong, stable base. This position physically takes up space, helping you dominate any room or space.

TRY IT... for a power surge during a disagreement.



THE SHARP LOOK

This classic pose exudes strength. Adopt a wide stance, place your hands on your hips and open out your chest. Tilt up your chin to maximise the power of this pose.

TRY IT... to give you confidence when talking to a group.

8 HARNESS THE POWER OF POSITIVE SELF-AFFIRMATION

"Your thoughts are so powerful that your brain treats thinking and doing the same way," says Jessica. "Just thinking about an action causes the same motor neurons to fire as actually doing the action." Changing the way you think about speaking up will give you courage.

DO IT Write down a sentence highlighting your strongest fears about speaking in public, for example, 'I hate speaking in public, I always look totally unprepared'. Flip that to 'I love public speaking, I always speak clearly and effectively'. Write your new sentence down three times and post it in places you see often in the home. Your bedside table is a must (sleep is key to creating lasting memories), plus perhaps beside the kettle or bathroom mirror.

Read your sentence aloud whenever you see it. When negative thoughts arise, shut them down by repeating your new, positive sentence slowly and firmly. Watch your thought patterns begin to shift. ■



WHY IT'S IMPORTANT FOR MEN TO *Talk*

Talking doesn't always come naturally, but it can help to improve your wellbeing and mental health

WORDS JULIE BASSETT

Talking is an important part of life. It helps us to build connections and foster strong relationships, to communicate at work, and to share hobbies and interests. It can be hard, however, to talk about things like emotions, feelings, worries and concerns. Internalising these thoughts can make it harder to confront them and solve our issues, which can build up and contribute towards higher stress levels, mental health conditions like depression and anxiety, and even some physical symptoms such as headaches and pain.

Men often find it harder than women to talk to others about these kinds of thoughts and feelings. There are many reasons for this, some of which are societal and some are physiological. Traditional and stereotypical expectations don't give much space for men to explore their feelings and verbalise them. Phrases such as 'boys don't cry' can often be drilled into us from a young age, and as we get older it's harder to unpick these unhelpful learnings.

Men are also more inclined to push emotions and feelings to one side. Part of this is due to the fact, some studies suggest, that

the male brain is more 'solution-driven', trying to find a way to solve problems rather than share or talk about them. Strong emotions can also be more overwhelming, and the brain may try to shut them out, rather than let them in. Mindfulness helps in learning to acknowledge feelings and beginning to understand them, which can make it easier to talk about them.

It's not easy to start a conversation around difficult topics like mental health, worries, stress, anxieties or feeling unhappy. It's important to talk to someone you trust, as this will help you to feel comfortable in opening up. This might be a family member or a trusted friend. Make sure that you're in an environment where you feel happy to talk – a noisy public space is not ideal, but home might feel too personal. Ask the person you're with if they're okay to listen to something you have to talk about, and explain how you're feeling as best you can. You might find that the person you're talking to has some experience and advice, or is just happy to let you talk and offer support. The more you talk to others, the more they will feel they can come and talk to you in turn. ■

**“MEN OFTEN
FIND IT HARDER
TO TALK
TO OTHERS
ABOUT THESE
THOUGHTS”**

TRY A TEXT

If the thought of talking face to face is too much, start with a message or an email to open a conversation.

SPEAKING TO A PROFESSIONAL

If you're worried about the way you feel, you may find talking to a stranger easier than talking to a loved one. Sometimes it can be hard to talk to someone you're close to; we often find it more difficult to show a perceived weakness in front of friends and family. If you are feeling overwhelmed or low, you may find it easier to talk to someone you don't know, who's trained to listen and advise. You can access talking therapies through your doctor, but there may be a waiting list if you're in the UK and accessing services on the NHS. If you have the resources, or it's covered by your health insurance, you can opt to find a private practitioner who you can talk to. There are also plenty of online, phone and text services where there is someone who can listen to you. Don't leave it if you're feeling worried or alone – the sooner you talk, the sooner you can start to address whatever is bothering you, and you can make steps to address the issues. Sometimes when we leave it too late to talk, it becomes a more serious problem and can have a greater impact on our health and wellbeing.

LIVING IN A Material WORLD



Do you place importance on possessions over people? What are the factors that lead to the way we consume? Let's explore what it means to be materialistic

WORDS LEAH LARWOOD

Arguably, we do live in a material world, and it's hard to avoid spending money on things we like. However, it's helpful to explore the different drivers behind materialism - is it something we're born with and does our childhood impact how attracted we are to shiny things? In this article, we'll look at the ways materialism might impact some more than others, including the motivators and underlying factors at play.

First, let's define materialism, which can be described in both a sociological and psychological sense, but it also has a philosophical meaning, too. In this article, we're going to explore the former. Materialism is a preoccupation with the pursuit of things material to the neglect of the mental or the spiritual.

In a therapeutic sense, Ali Ross, psychotherapist and spokesperson for the UK Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP) says, "Materialism shows itself when people strive for or highly value the acquisition of things; the bigger, brighter, newer, shinier, the better, and then often want to

be seen to have acquired them. This can show itself in the way some materialistic people want to be seen as successful for having acquired these things."

A short history of materialism

It's important to highlight that materialism not only relates to purchasing possessions such as cars, clothing, beauty products, gadgets and other collectables, but it can also refer to purchasing other things such as experiences and services. A materialistic mindset is part of a long history that established its foothold in Western culture over the last century. Materialism has, in part, led to how we identify with ourselves and others in society, and it can also dictate our status or level of authority.

We're not the only beings to covet objects. Many animals have possessions. Spiders have webs, and magpies can gather all sorts of things, for example. However, only humans have such a complex culture for material items, many of which we depend upon for survival. So how did we evolve to be so materialistic? According to an article in *New Scientist* (March 2014) stone tools may well

have been the first possessions to be owned by our ancestors 2.6 million years ago.

When childhood impacts materialism

Flash forward hundreds of millennia and the digital age has given rise to a new kind of pressure to make purchases that perhaps, in many cases, we don't really need. At the heart of materialism is the idea that having money and possessions leads to happiness. It's worth noticing that most of us aren't born overly materialistic, and often it's a learned behaviour. However, it can also be something we actively shy away from, too.

Ali Ross says, "There are those who grew up in a very materialistic environment and want to reject materialism in their adulthood as a means of distancing themselves from their materialistic childhood and a family culture that they disagree with. Sometimes this is because, in their parents' material pursuits, the child lost out on time in emotional connection, in aspects of life that matter beyond the material. It is equally possible that children brought up in materialistic environments want to prove their independence and competence

“MATERIALISM SHOWS ITSELF WHEN PEOPLE STRIVE FOR THE ACQUISITION OF THINGS”

by maintaining or even surpassing the materialistic lifestyles of their parents.”

Then there are those who had very little as children and who grow up to be rich, successful and materialistic. Sometimes, people who had little growing up might feel the shame associated with their hardship or were bullied for being different in some way. Ali says, “If these children grow up to be rich, materialism can act as evidence to them that they’re no longer living hand-to-mouth, struggling to survive, disempowered or vulnerable. Material wealth can make people feel powerful and safe both in practical terms but also in social terms.

“By living a materialistic lifestyle, there is a belief amongst materialists that they will be perceived by others as powerful, capable and successful, and the threat of being judged by others is lesser. In »

EXPLORE YOUR VALUES

Try some freewriting to explore your stance on materialism. Simply use these writing prompts to freewrite for five minutes or more by responding to each question.

What are the things that bring you the most joy in life?

What is it about those situations, occasions or things that you love?

What material possessions could you live without?

Which ones could you not live without?

What things did you love to do when you were younger?



practice, this rarely manifests and living materialistically does little good for an individual's sense of self-worth or value, and often therapy is a space in which materialistic people become less materialistic. Conversely, sometimes clients become more embracing of their materialism and decide to 'go with it' all the more and can have a very enjoyable life in doing so."

Is materialism one big introjection?

In some ways, materialism can also be described as an introject. An introjection was a term used by Sigmund Freud and was later adopted by other forms of psychology. An introject is when we swallow messages whole from loved ones, society and teachers.

The forefather of gestalt psychotherapy, Fritz Perls, considered that when a baby cuts teeth, choice increases such as chewing over what enters the body, suddenly becomes possible. The infant can chew over material before either swallowing it or rejecting it.

Each person has a different set of introjects (or shoulds) and many of these might be shared societal ideals that may or may not inherently change over time. Often an introject about materialism, such as 'When I buy a new outfit, I feel good', might serve us well but if we ever feel righteous, stuck, frustrated or unsatisfied in some way, this could become problematic. It could be that a deep sense of 'must' might be controlling, without us even realising it.

An introject is therefore when a person takes on board, without question, a belief, value, attitude, trait or way of being from the environment - such as materialism - resulting in the building of a rulebook of internalised shoulds. This can be done consciously or unconsciously. Often, they become a weight on our shoulders, a habit that becomes burdensome, and more often than not, gets in the way of other ways of being.

Introjects are developed from the moment we are born and stem from caregivers and the environment, values, beliefs or a way of being we've grown up with. When we are young, and in adulthood, we might not have questioned whether this 'rule' feels acceptable, or we may have felt as though we couldn't or didn't know how to disagree at the time. Some introjects around materialism might have been internalised as helpful ways to live our lives, such as 'When I drive my new car, I feel successful and important', or on a smaller scale: 'When I buy new stationery, my work will be better'.

CREATIVE ADJUSTMENT

Sometimes it's necessary for our survival that we 'creatively adjust' to any given situation. In gestalt psychology, the term 'creative adjustment' explains that sometimes we need to find coping strategies or adaptations to behaviour in order to survive an experience.

Creative adjustment is when we maintain a tolerable level of contact with a situation we are in. This process can cause us problems and suffering when the creative adjustments we make to one situation become fixed, stopping us from adapting to new situations.

Buying shoes, motorbikes, ornaments, handbags or jewellery might be a way of dealing with another situation. It can be a way of avoiding an uncomfortable feeling, a way to fill an empty void temporarily, and in other cases, these behaviours can sometimes become addictive.

Chewing before you swallow

However, sometimes introjects around materialism might not serve us and lead to a situation where we might feel temporarily satisfied, but later, once the dopamine hit has passed, we're left feeling a little unsatisfied or empty. Some people put themselves under too much pressure in order to book that holiday or buy a new car, and others might encounter feelings of 'not good enough' if they don't make that important purchase. Other signals might be that you're going along with a way of being that rubs you up the wrong way, you don't have much agency, or feel stuck in a situation.

Values

Arguably, there is a core driving factor behind whether someone experiences materialism more than another. Our values guide our thoughts, words and actions. They influence how we make decisions and inform how we behave. It can be helpful to reflect on what our values are. They help us to be authentic and conduct ourselves in a variety of social settings. Ultimately, our values keep us focused on what is important and what we want to achieve, and they can certainly impact to what degree we experience materialism.

Case Study

Five years ago, before Kim Palmer became the founder of the women-focused hypnotherapy app Clementine, she took a long, hard look at her values, and what she discovered set her on



a brand-new path in her life. “I wasn’t happy in my career, and so I started by getting to grips with what was important to me – my values,” Kim remembers.

“I took a few weeks to do this. I sat in bed every night with a notebook and started scribbling all the things I had done in my life that I loved and hated etc, and I can’t tell you how many light-bulb moments went off whilst I was doing this. I realised I was in the wrong job and that my true desire was to start my own business. I realised that I did want to have another child. I realised that I had some friendships that were no longer working. I realised that I wanted complete financial freedom and more. Understanding my values has changed my life, and I have become a less materialistic person.

“I used to strive to buy things that I thought would make me happy, like clothes, houses, cars, going on fancy holidays, having my nails done etc, but the truth is that none of these things made me happy in the way that I needed,” Kim continues. “They gave me a fleeting moment of thrill and a sense of newness, but those wore off pretty quickly, and I was still left with a sense of emptiness.”

After identifying the areas of materialism that weren’t working for her, Kim set about reshaping her lifestyle to fit her newly discovered values. “When I started to change things about my life, like not worrying about what our house looked like, selling my car, moving to rental, and buying less clothes, it became clear that there was no void from changing these things,” she concludes. “In fact, the opposite happened as I realised pretty quickly that those things were not significantly adding value to my everyday contentedness. They were distracting. I’ve realised that my joy and happiness come from savouring the everyday things that I do, like walking, having my coffee, sitting down to dinner with the family.” ■

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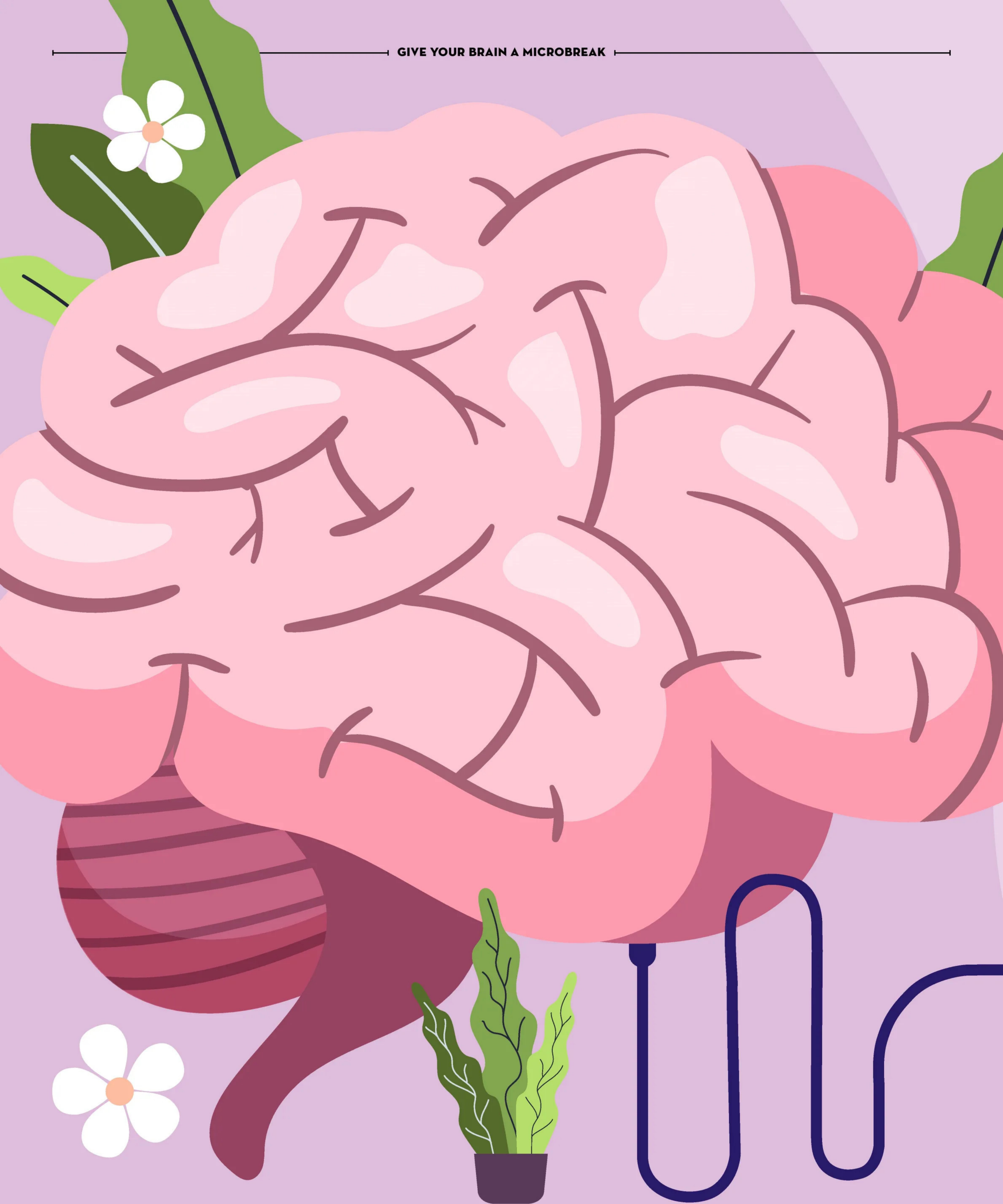


THE BUDDHIST VIEW: 5 WAYS TO COMBAT THE MATERIALISM CYCLE

Conversely, an ancient way of thinking encouraged by the Buddhism community offers a new mindset to counteract unhealthy materialism.

Buddhism promotes a minimalist philosophy and way of living. Although Buddhism is not against consuming altogether – Buddhists do recognise the need for certain possessions – it does encourage people to think more mindfully before they buy.

1. *Before you buy something, pause.*
2. Ask yourself, ‘Do I need this?’
3. *‘Will it add benefits to my life somehow?’*
4. Especially if this is a big purchase, spend five minutes mindfully considering the item.
5. *Notice if it does add benefit(s) to your development and happiness.*



GIVE YOUR BRAIN

A Microbreak

*Just a few minutes' rest can help you reset
and recharge. Here's how to refocus your
energy quickly and effectively*

WORDS DEBRA WATERS

We know that taking a break is good for us, both mentally and physically, but research has shown that employees benefit from mini breathers. "A series of recent studies on work breaks have argued that microbreaks are beneficial for wellbeing and productivity," says Professor Sooyeol Kim, who conducted one of the studies. "Taking microbreaks helps employees take respite and boost their energy." Yet microbreaks don't have to be restricted to our jobs - they can be taken at any time and in any place. »

“RECENT STUDIES HAVE ARGUED
THAT MICROBREAKS ARE BENEFICIAL
FOR WELLBEING AND PRODUCTIVITY”

"Microbreaks are becoming more common and are increasingly fundamental for positive mental wellbeing," says life coach Kamran Bedi, author of *The Anxiety Antidote* (£12.99/\$16, Watkins). "Breaking up your day with one-to ten-minute breaks from work, tasks and always being on the go, can help relieve stress and anxiety, and overstimulation from the internet, social media and screen time."

MICRO-HABITS

It's not just microbreaks that do us good. Micro-habits – that's a positive habit no more than a few moments long – can enhance our lives by empowering us to take small steps towards goals without overwhelming us. Here are some micro-habits to incorporate into your day.

TIDY

Make your bed – a tidy house is a tidy mind.

HYDRATE

Swap that first cup of tea or coffee for a glass of water.

ORGANISE

Write a daily to-do list in order of importance to help your day go smoothly.

BREATHE

Each time you unnecessarily reach for your phone (eg to check social media or play games), take deep, slow breaths for 30 seconds instead.

LEARN

Read a book, play the piano, write in your journal, or use a language app for just five minutes a day – eventually, you'll find yourself doing it for longer without it feeling like an effort.

This sounds encouraging, but you may be wondering how short breaks work as well as longer ones. "Microbreaks help because the brain can only focus on a specific activity for a certain length of time," says life coach Siân Winslade (sianwinslade.com). "We've been led to believe that multitasking is a good thing, whereas it just allows us to do two tasks at 50% capacity, doing neither of them well. We think that working through and finishing something is more important than how we're feeling, but if we think of our brains as batteries going into low power mode as our phones do, we use less brain power, go slower and become less bright and perky."

The beauty of microbreaks is that they don't take too much time, although you'll need to commit if you want to reap the benefits. "Returning to a simpler, slower pace of living with a ten-minute break can work wonders on your mind and body," says Kamran. "But incorporating a microbreak into your day-to-day comes through self-awareness and self-action."

To get started, set regular alarms or add some microbreaks to your daily 'to-do' list – like the ones we've suggested below – that way, you'll start to integrate them into your life. Trust us, you won't regret it.

Have a nap

Also known as a power nap, a short nap can give you as much energy as two cups of strong coffee, and the effects are longer-lasting, says Lisa Artis, deputy CEO at The Sleep Charity. "We'd usually recommend around 20 minutes to give the body a chance to recharge, but some people feel the effects from a micronap (ten minutes)," she says. "The best time to nap is the post-lunch lull (between 1pm and 3pm) – to avoid sleeping longer, set an alarm on your phone. An alternative is to hold a set of keys in your hand and lie down with your hand hanging. As you lose consciousness the keys will slip out of your grasp and wake you as they hit the floor."

Hydrate

Water is the basis of life, and even mild dehydration can adversely affect our blood

pressure, body temperature and heart rate. Dr Kim recommends drinking water throughout the day, as does Siân. "Keeping a bottle of water nearby helps not only with your concentration and reaction time, but improves memory and mood, and reduces headaches, tiredness and anxiety," she says. Take frequent small sips rather than gulping down a whole glass – this enables the body to store more water because it won't overload the kidneys (and you'll need the toilet less).

Contrary to popular belief, the recommended two litres per day doesn't have to come just from water – black, green or herbal teas count, as does milk (especially fat-free) and even milky coffee.

Listen to Mozart

We know that music has the ability to affect our emotional state, but certain music can actually make us think more clearly. It's known as the Mozart Effect, and researchers found that listening to ten minutes of Mozart improved people's spatial-temporal reasoning* (the ability to organise and problem-solve). And another study** found that listening to Mozart for 25 minutes reduced blood pressure.

If you're not in the mood for classical, any music that means something to you can alter your mood. "Music is a great way to anchor particular emotions," says Zoe Thompson (phoenixlifecoach.co.uk). "I have a playlist that's calming, and one that's energising. Think about songs that make you feel a certain way and create your own playlists – just one or two tracks in five minutes can completely change your mood."

Meditate

Sometimes, just a few minutes of alone time can be all you need to mentally regroup. And if you meditate you'll feel even better. "Whether you choose a guided meditation or you take some time out in a quiet room, meditation can help you focus on the present and be aware of your thoughts and feelings," says life coach Zoe. "This can bring a sense of calm and improve attention and focus." The Headspace app includes guided 'mini' meditations.



“MICROBREAKS DON'T TAKE TOO MUCH TIME, BUT YOU MUST COMMIT TO REAP THE BENEFITS”

Try yoga

You don't need to commit to an hour's class - a few yogic breathing exercises and postures make an ideal microbreak.

“Yoga is a great way to bring you into the present moment and help you focus,” says yoga teacher Danny Griffiths (yoga-fit.co.uk). “There are many variations, but a common thread is breathwork, known as pranayama. Bringing our attention to the breath and relearning to breathe slowly and fully can de-stress, which in turn helps with concentration and clarity. For example, alternate-nostril breathing such as nadi shodhana infuses the body with oxygen, calming and rejuvenating the nervous system.”

You'll also benefit from a couple of postures - balancing postures, for instance, are particularly good for concentration. “Tree pose helps ground you, enhancing stability and calming the nervous system,” says Danny. “While dancer's pose is another balancing posture that helps bring you into the present. This is great for getting over stress and anxiety, clearing the mind of useless thoughts, and improving blood circulation and endurance.”

Step outside

A change is as good as a rest, and that includes even the simple action of stepping outdoors to look at a different view. “It's important to get outside, if only for a short period,” says Siân. “Changing the environment allows for more stimulation of the brain and improves focus, reduces stress hormones, and improves mood.”

And while you're outside, why not take a short walk? Even a quick stroll to the shops or around the garden is a microbreak well spent. “Walking raises the heart rate, therefore improving cardiovascular health, and helps you regulate deeper breathing, while the physical movement can also help release any stress or tension and re-energise you,” says Zoe. “Getting outside also provides fresh air and very important vitamin D exposure, which aids our sleep and immune system.” ■



NEED SOME ENCOURAGEMENT?

Try the Pomodoro Technique

If you struggle to focus on tasks, then feel guilty taking breaks, you may need the Pomodoro Technique. For those who are wondering, it's named after the tomato-shaped kitchen timer the inventor, Francesco Cirillo, used to develop the method ('pomodoro' is Italian for 'tomato').

“The Pomodoro Technique is one of the most effective ways of taking a break,” says Siân, who shows us how here:

- For every 25 minutes of focused time, take a five-minute break.
 - **This can be repeated up to four times, then you'll need a longer break of 20-30 minutes.**
- One of the most important aspects of the Pomodoro Technique is that you move away from screens. Reading websites and checking emails taxes many of the same mental processes we use when working, compounding tiredness, so don't use your break to do anything that requires a screen.
 - **Increase your heart rate and get 20 minutes' exercise every two hours by doing five minutes of movement every 25 minutes.**

Try jogging on the spot, lunges, squats or stretches.

- For extra support, download a Pomodoro timer from the App store or Google Play.

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116
pages
OF EXPERT
ADVICE

Psychology Now

TAKE CONTROL OF YOUR MIND
FOR A HAPPIER, HEALTHIER LIFE

Human nature is a fascinating concept. From the way we think to the way we behave, the mind is a powerful yet delicate tool, and must be nurtured in the same way we take care of our bodies. Gaining a greater understanding of human behaviour and mental processes will ultimately lead to a better understanding of ourselves. And once we realise why we and others behave in certain ways – whether alone or in group settings – it becomes much easier to avoid stressful situations, reduce anxiety, make better decisions, and live a more fulfilled life.

